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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

SADDLE MOUNTAIN
by Ray G. Ellis

THE LAST RIDE
by Sally Tyree Smith

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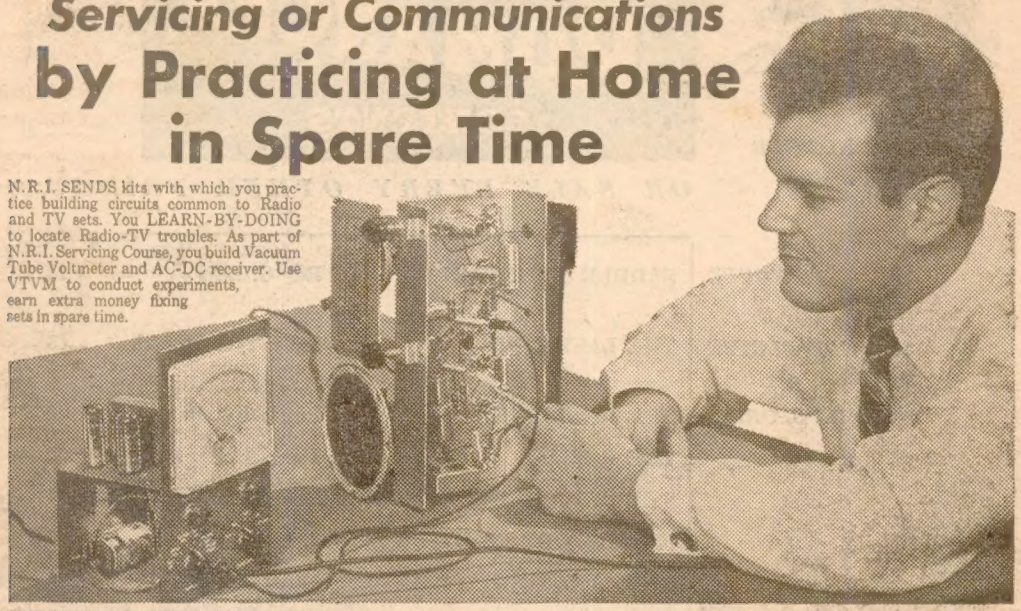

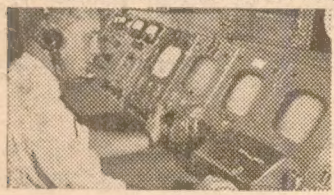

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J. E. SMITH
Founder

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER

November 16, 1956
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RANCH ROMANCES

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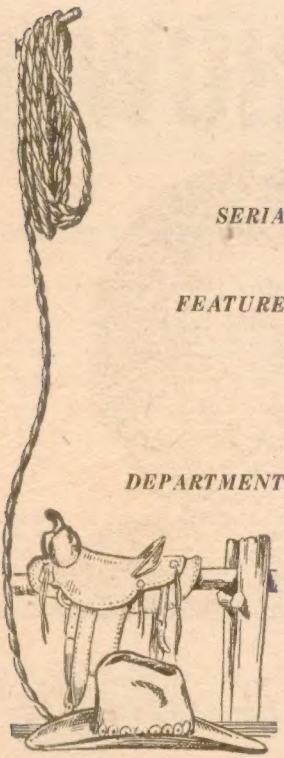

HELEN TONO
Editor

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Teenager

Dear Editor:

I have started several times to write to your column, but never went through with it. As you can see, I finally got up enough nerve to write in, and I hope you'll use my letter. I am 15 years old, 5'6" tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes. I like all kinds of sports. Would especially like to hear from boys around my own age, and any servicemen.

JUDY E. KLUND

Creston, Iowa
R.R. #4

Keeps Trying

Dear Editor:

This is my third try at getting into "Our Air Mail." Hope I succeed this time. I am 14 years old, 5'4" tall, weigh 100 lbs., and have blonde hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from all teenage boys and girls.

BETTY TUTWILER

P.O. Box 2624
Tampa, Florida

Farm Lad

Dear Editor:

This is my first try for pen pals, and I hope I get quite a few. I'm a farm boy of 12. My hobbies are horseback riding and weight lifting. Would especially like to hear from girls between 12 and 13 years old.

GARY J. GILBERTSON

Wheelock
North Dakota

Shy Seventeen

Dear Editor:

I hope with all my heart that you'll give me a small space in your column. I'm 17 years old, 5'4" tall, weigh 108 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I like to write letters very much, and will also exchange snaps. So all of you from 13 to 30, please write to me.

CAROLE CAMBLIN

Box 53
Midwest, Wyoming

Brother and Sister Act

Dear Editor:

My brother and I have a lot of time to write letters and therefore we would like to have pen pals very much. John is 23 years old, is 6' tall, and has brown hair and eyes. He likes fishing and football best of all. His job is in a sporting-goods store. I am 31 years old, am divorced, and have a girl eight years old. I'm 5'5½" tall, weigh 138 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I like good shows, dancing, fishing, and football.

LILLIAN AND JOHN SQUIRES

84 Adeline Avenue
Hamilton Ontario,
Canada

High School Student

Dear Editor:

I am 15 years old, weigh 160 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I am a sophomore in high school. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world, and especially am interested in letters from girls. Promise to answer all letters received.

PAUL M. SEAVERS

Route #2
Oliver Springs, Tennessee

Two City Gals

Dear Editor:

We live in a large city and are quite lonesome, as we can't find many things to do. We have been readers of RANCH ROMANCES for six years and would like to make some pen pals. We promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

JERRY MC ELYEA
ANN VANCE

824 E. 21st Street
Little Rock, Arkansas

Calling the Ladies

Dear Editor:

I am 37 years old, single, have black hair and blue eyes, and stand 6' tall. I desire some female pen pals, and would be pleased if some ladies wrote me. Hope that I'll get a large response.

ORVILLE SMITH, JR

514½ Main Street
Kansas City 6, Missouri

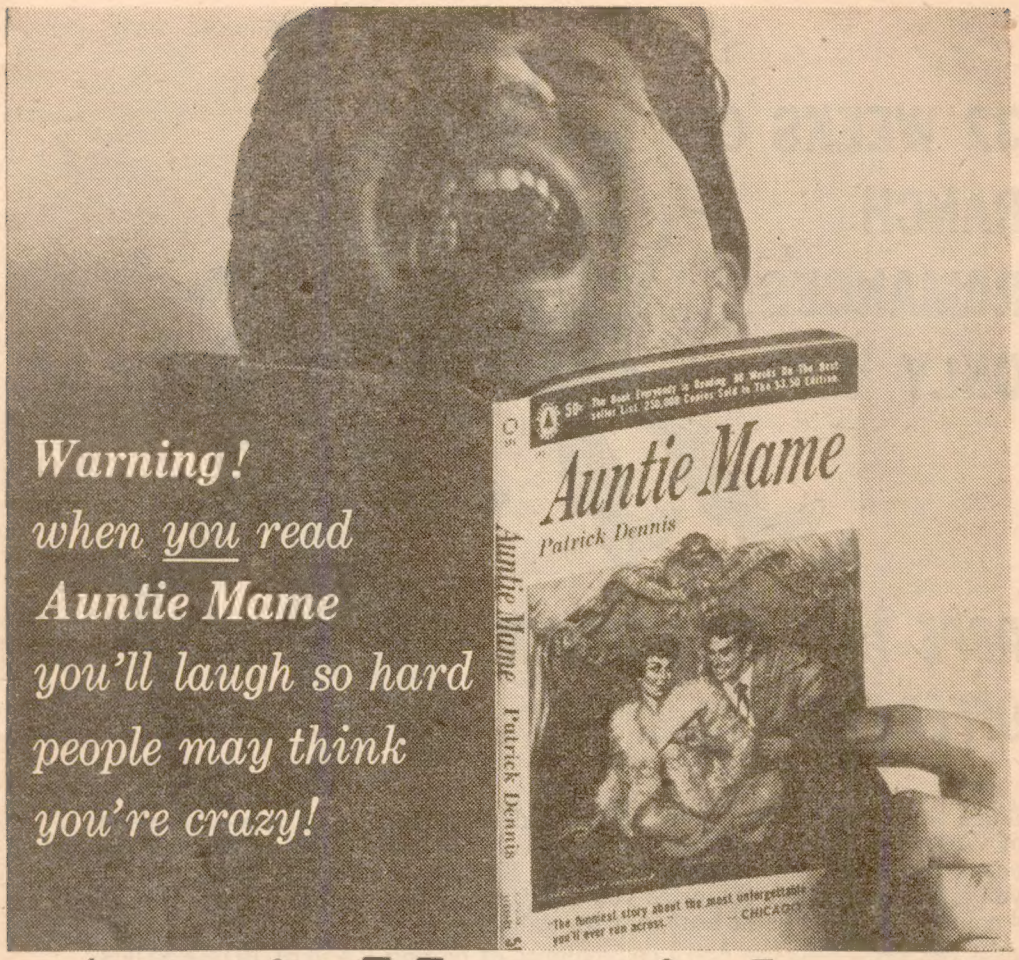
Interesting Baby Sitter

Dear Editor:

I'm a baby sitter here in Texas, and I'm getting a little tired of sitting without any mail to read. So won't you oblige by writing to me? I'm 27 years old and have brown hair and eyes. Would like to hear from anyone around my own age. Will be glad to exchange snapshots with those who desire it.

SHIRLEY SMITH

321 West Beauregard
San Angelo, Texas



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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

WORKING at top speed, a Dallas, Tex., thief stole the batteries from four parked cars and moved on to the fifth, not even bothering to get a good look at it. It was a police car and two patrolmen, who had been watching the whole thing, got out and arrested the thief.

MAILMEN in Salt Lake City, Utah, are telling about one of their colleagues who knocked at a door to tell a resident there was three cents' postage due on a letter he was delivering. The woman inside refused to open the door; instead she called out, "I can't open up today—it's the canary's day out of the cage."

THIEVES who took a hog from a Douglas, Ill., farm evidently wanted to give it the proper care. A week after they stole the animal, they returned and hauled off a hog waterer.

HIS car ran out of gasoline, so an Albuquerque, N. M., salesman trotted off to get a can full from a service station. When he returned, his sample case was gone. He set the can down and walked off to borrow a funnel so he could pour the gas in his tank. When he got back the can of gasoline was gone.

WHEN a small, elderly man offered to prove how strong he was by lifting a 195-pound, 6'4" Phoenix, Ariz., railroad brakeman—and proceeded to accomplish the feat—the brakeman thought it was remarkable.. Even more remarkable, he reported to police later, was the fact that his watch, wallet and money were gone when the little man left.

THE long arm of the law reached out and slapped a Detroit, Mich., man on the back as he stood choking and coughing on a street corner. The service cost him $50 in fines, because the helpful slap dislodged 18 betting slips he had been hiding in his mouth.

TO PROVE he was not guilty of making an illegal U-turn, a Bloomgton, Ind., art student prepared an elaborate drawing to show what really had happened. Nevertheless, the judge fined him $5—then collected only $1, because he liked the drawing so much he bought it for $4.

"THIS is a stickup," snarled the gunman to the clerk in a Los Angeles, Calif., store. The clerk glanced at his gun, then calmly walked out onto the crowded sidewalk. The gunman was so confused he put the gun in his pocket and left.

CALLING the police early one a.m., a frightened Ponca City, Okla., housewife told them the keys to the family car had been stolen. The police arrived and, after an intensive search, found the keys—in the woman's purse.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

RAW EDGE

Universal-International's new movie recreates a frontier age when women were as rare as gold . . . and as bitterly fought for

RAW EDGE, a new Western made by Universal International, is a dramatic story about the days when women were as precious and as bitterly fought for as any treasure on the frontier.

Yvonne de Carlo, back in Hollywood after several years of making movies abroad, plays the wife of a powerful trader in early Oregon, who completely rules his own territory. One of the laws which he lays down, and which his henchmen enforce, is that a widow must go to the first man who claims her.

Mara Corday, a beautiful Indian woman, is one of the victims of this law, when her husband is unjustly lynched for attacking Yvonne, and she is claimed by one of the trader's gunmen.

Rory Calhoun plays the dead man's brother. He blames the trader for both the lynching and the kidnapping, and vows to break the trader's stranglehold upon the territory.

Raw Edge is one of those rare Westerns in which the women figure as importantly in the plot as the men. Behind the scenes, while the movie was being filmed, it was the same story, at least as far as beautiful, exciting Yvonne de Carlo is concerned. Nobody ever put that girl in a back seat.

She also provided the cast with a real-life romance to talk about which was even more exciting for them than the one in the plot.

In one of the film sequences Yvonne is chased by a band of badmen, which included a stuntman named Bob Morgan, whose part is not important enough to put his name on the list of screen credits. Behind the scenes, Yvonne and Bob renewed an acquaintance which began when both were just starting out in Hollywood. They hadn't seen each other since, as Yvonne climbed to stardom both here and abroad, and Bob continued to be gainfully employed as a stuntman.

Raw Edge was finished on a Friday. On Monday the well-known Miss DeCarlo and the unknown Mr. Morgan were married in Reno.

Both say their plans for the future haven't been changed by the marriage. "We both want to work in movies and to travel," said Yvonne, "so we thought, why not do it together?"

Rory Calhoun also made news during the

filming of *Raw Edge,* though it wasn't romantic news, and for his fans it's downright bad news. He announced that he is buying a huge cattle ranch in Arizona, and from now on he wants to spend at least half his time there and cut down his movie making to two pictures a year.

His activities last year may have had something to do with his decision. In twelve months he made nine movies and three TV shows, and went on four personal appearance tours. The life of a rancher must look appealingly peaceful to a man who has had a schedule as crowded as that.

"I never expected to be a movie star," said Rory. "It was a pure fluke, meeting Alan Ladd on a bridle path, which led to my first part and to everything else that's happened. I think it's about time I sat down somewhere and thought about being a movie star."

"Maybe," I said, "you'll decide you don't like it."

Rory grinned. "No chance of that. But I have a feeling, and plenty of actors agree with me, that I'll be a happier and a better movie star if I only work at it part-time."

Yvonne, who heard this conversation, took issue with Rory. "I want to work full-time, all the time," she said. "But I think you can get stale if you stay in Hollywood. You can get stuck in one type of part, one type of picture."

She got out of the rut by going abroad, working in England, Germany, Egypt and even the little Isle of Jersey.

"People in Hollywood thought I was mad when I said I wanted to play a comedy part," she said. "So I went and looked for one elsewhere."

She got it, too, in one of her most successful movies, *The Captain's Paradise,* with Alec Guinness.

I wondered what brought her back.

"That's easy," she answered. "Where else can you make a Western?"

Yvonne is a fine horsewoman and insists on doing all her own riding in movies. She even has a mantelpiece full of prizes she used to win in rodeos.

"I'm just like an old cowboy," she confessed, smiling. "After a certain amount of time I have to get back in the saddle again."

Widow Yvonne DeCarlo gets help from a kind stranger, Rory Calhoun

JOHN PAYNE
Versatile

NO ONE in Hollywood can look back upon a more varied career than John Payne. He did everything, from baby sitting to professional wrestling, to get through college and get himself started on an acting career.

What made his determination all the more admirable was that he had never expected to be in financial straits. His father, George Washington Payne, was a leading citizen of Roanoke, Va., where John was born.

While John was in preparatory school, his father died, leaving Mrs. Payne with three sons to educate. But John took matters into his own hands. He spent his summer vacations shipping as a steward on cruises to Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America.

Next he enrolled at the University of Virginia, where he became so interested in campus theatricals that he decided to make acting his career, and transferred to Columbia's school of the drama, in New York.

It was there that the high cost of living, and schooling, began its pinch, and John started on his varied employment. Baby-sitting jobs were easy to come by, but they didn't pay well. Typing jobs were the same. Running a switchboard was steady, but took too much time. That went for working in a gas station, too. Finally he applied for a job managing a poolroom, and got it.

"I found out later," he said, "that I had only one qualification for the job—muscles. My chief function was settling arguments, which often included bouncing troublesome customers."

His success at keeping peace in the poolroom brought him to the attention of a fight manager, who first got him some wrestling matches and then tried him out at prize fighting.

"It paid pretty well," John recalls ruefuly, "but not for long. I kept getting knocked out."

At long last he got the kind of job he was looking for. He was offered $50 a week to sing in the chorus of a Schubert musical, and he jumped at it. Then he played with Beatrice Lillie in *At Home Abroad,* which brought him a Hollywood contract.

He had the familiar Hollywood experience of drawing down a salary and never doing any work. He was under contract first to Sam Goldwyn and later to Paramount. Both dropped him.

"But, looking back, there's some satisfaction in my release from Paramount," says John. "They let Betty Grable go at the same time, and if they couldn't see her talent, you could hardly expect them to see mine."

But 20th Century-Fox saw talent in both of them, and it was not long afterward that they both became big stars and were teamed together in a series of musicals.

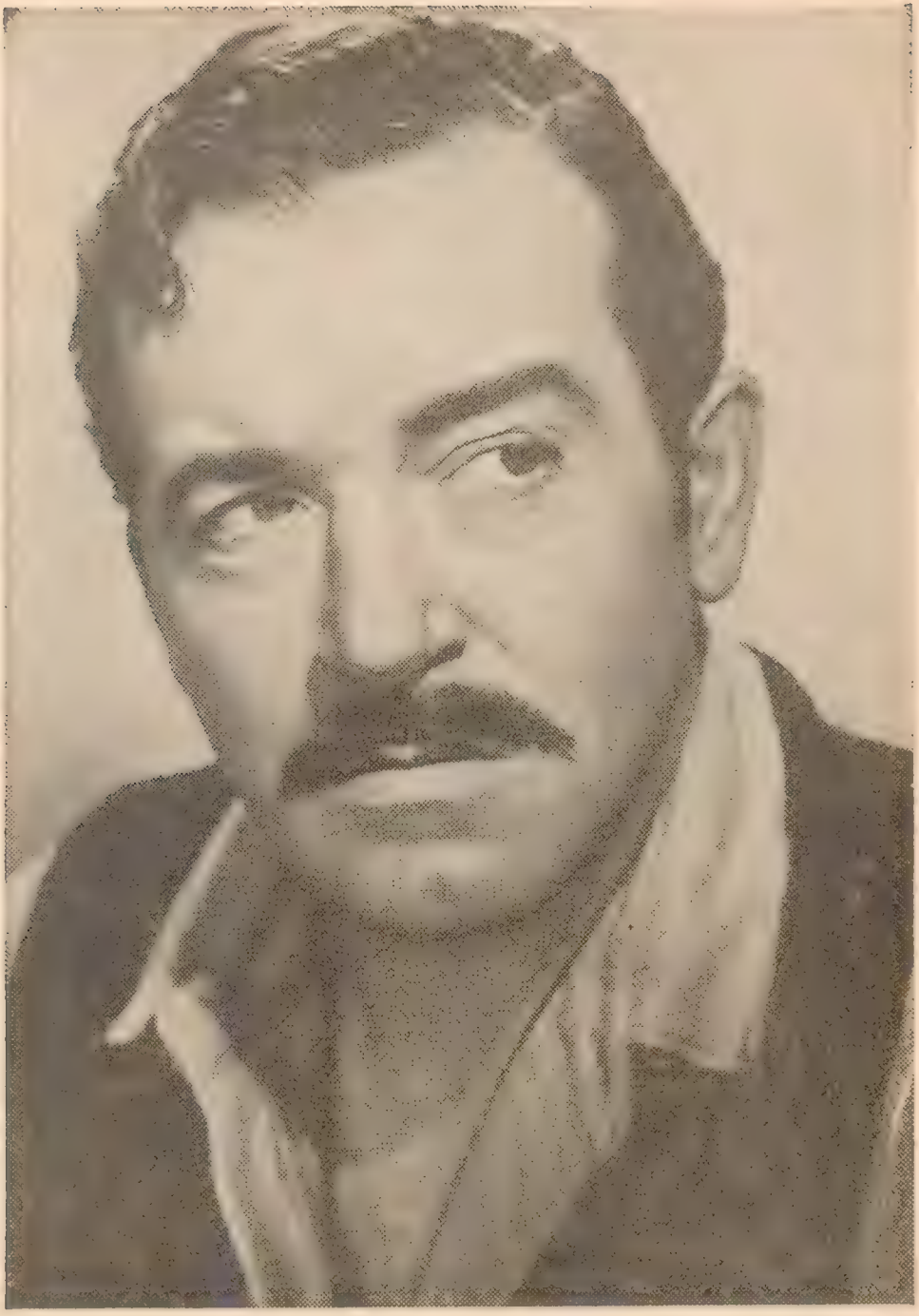
He was at the top of his popularity when he enlisted in the Air Force during the war. When he got back to Hollywood he was determined to stop specializing in musicals, and began making action and adventure movies.

John has had two unsuccessful marriages, to Ann Shirley and to Gloria De Haven, and he has three children.

These days he's keeping clear of Hollywood social life. He spends most of his time in his house on the beach at Santa Monica, and never misses his swim, winter or summer. The rest of his leisure time he uses for reading.

"I like being an actor," he says, grinning. "I guess I'm just too lazy to work and too nervous to steal."

I can't comment on his nerves, but the record shows he's not lazy. Just last year alone, he went to 53 U.S. cities for stage appearances and radio and TV interviews. And he made a movie, *Rebel in Town,* besides.



United Artists

Besides being a busy actor, John has many varied interests

Saddle

Mountain

by RAY G. ELLIS

FOR SUE, the stolen money could buy freedom . . . for Curt it could mean betraying all the good things he had ever believed in

CURT PERRIS hung in the saddle of his dun horse as the animal descended the steep trail. On either side of him rose tall straight pines, their shade a mottling of light and dark in the afternoon sun. He knew that he was dropping toward the old town of Silver Ledge, for he remembered this trail from the years before.

He rubbed a hand across tired eyes, and then his fingers stopped to linger on a scar that extended from his left eye across his temple and into the hair. The gesture was a habit, but this time it brought memories back to him, an unpleasant remembrance of four years ago.

The trail leveled off and he entered a long, narrow meadow. Beaver ponds dotted the floor, making it marshy and impassable, so the road stayed in the trees. Presently he was dropping again, only not so steeply this time, and he began to see the mounds of old prospect holes in the side of the hill. A stream danced and sang below him, stopping to catch its breath in tiny pools and then going on again, anxious to reach the Dolores River ahead. He would have enjoyed the

ride if it hadn't been for the memories.

The narrow canyon began to widen out, and he could hear the dull rumble of the Dolores. There were more shaft houses now, and the hillsides above him were littered with rotting timbers. It looked as if a host of giant gophers had been at work on the mountains, he reflected, as he looked at the many tailings dumps.

Curt Perris was a tall, lean man in his early twenties. His hat was sweat stained, his coat worn thin. The black boots were scuffed and somewhat run down at the heels. He had a strong jaw, an aquiline nose, and dark, sharp eyes. The scar on his temple was the only thing that marred the smooth bronze surface of his face. He fingered the scar again as he broke into the open and entered the narrow valley through which the Dolores River flowed.

To his right, upstream, lay the town of Silver Ledge, or what was left of it. He splashed across the stream he had been following, and came into town.

He didn't think the man he had followed down the trail had known anybody was behind him. In the one brief glimpse Curt had had back there in the high country, he had noted the sorrel horse and the bright plaid shirt. Then the man had been hidden again by the trees.

On either side of Curt now were tumbledown buildings. There were tailings dumps that extended between the buildings almost to the street. At the opposite end of the town he caught a glimpse of an old deserted mill

Silver Ledge was not quite dead. There was a saloon that looked as if it was still open, although no horses were at the rail before it. There were several houses in good enough repair to be lived in, and there was a general store. A horse was at the rail there, a sorrel.

Beyond the store, a weathered sign announced the presence of a hotel. Curt rode down the street, studying the horse and then lifting his eyes to the store front. Through a dusty window he caught sight of something bright, and it moved. He saw that it wasn't the man in the bright shirt, but a woman in gingham. He looked closely, but the store was too dark and the window too dirty to see anything more.

The hotel was still in operation, after a fashion. Silver Ledge was a dead mining town, but it was on the trail to other diggings far up the valley. If a man went far enough over the divide, he'd end up in the town of Telluride.

An old man sat in a rocker on the front porch of the hotel, a huge wad of tobacco bulging his cheeks. He studied Curt, then spat a brown stream that cleared the railing and plopped in the dirt below.

"Any empty rooms?" Curt asked, grinning. He dismounted and flipped the reins of his tired dun horse around the rail.

The old man rocked some more and then said, "Depends. What color is your money?"

"Any color you want."

The man spat again and said, "Go on inside and sign up. Take any room. They're all empty now."

Curt mounted the rotting steps, feeling them give under his weight. The porch floor creaked and a musty smell greeted him from the open door to the lobby.

He nodded when the man said, "Rooms over the porch are the best. But none of 'em is exactly a bridal suite."

The old man had spoken the truth, Curt noted. The room he chose was the best of the lot, he ascertained by a hurried inspection, but even here paper peeled from the walls in curls and the ceiling was stained with water from the leaking room. He punched the bed with his fist and the springs squealed noisily. He sighed and went to the window. He was surprised to find that it came open when he heaved on it.

A few feet directly below him was the porch roof, slanting off toward the street. Across the street, downstream a short distance, was the old saloon, at street level in the front and held up on stilts at the rear. The whole town was built on the side of a hill above the river. On the other side of the hurrying water there were a few tumbledown shacks, remnants of a once-lively town.

Idly, Curt fingered the scar on his temple, and again the memories came flooding in, as bitter as unground coffee. A man made one mistake before he was twenty and couldn't live it down, at least not in Durango. Sheriff Tom Mackey saw to that.

He turned and looked about the room. It

was only a little worse than what he was accustomed to. A drifter has no right to complain, he reflected, but a man who is hounded for years because of one mistake has that right. He drew out tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

NOW he was drifting again, after having left Durango the day before. He had headed up toward Silverton, but when he'd reached an old, nearly forgotten trail, he'd taken it instead, for the hell of it. Then he'd found that somebody else was on that trail. Later he had seen the man, far ahead, riding a sorrel horse and wearing a bright-colored shirt. Probably the sorrel in front of the general store belonged to the man. It made no difference, really.

Curt had come back after nearly four years, tired of being constantly on the move, hoping that the thing he'd done would be forgotten. But Tom hadn't forgotten. Curt hadn't been in town ten minutes before the sheriff had collared him and demanded to know what he was up to. And the lawman had watched him as if Curt were the only man in town. When Curt hadn't gotten himself a job on the second day in town, Mackey had warned him, with half the town looking on. After that there were no jobs to be had. In disgust and bitterness, he had ridden out again.

He went back downstairs and was told by the old man that there was a shed of sorts and some feed behind the hotel. When he had walked the horse around, and had off-saddled him, Curt climbed to the porch again and settled himself into an empty chair.

The old man rocked, looking out across the narrow valley. The boards under the runners of the rocker gave out with a rhythmic squeak. Curt waited for the man to speak, and then decided he wasn't going to.

"Is it always quiet like this?" Curt asked, his voice loud in the empty town.

The old man spat over the railing. He was dressed in a soiled suit of a fashion popular in a year that Curt would have had a hard time remembering. A scraggly beard adorned his face and was stained around the mouth by tobacco. For all that, his eyes were bright, and Curt guessed that his mind was alert.

"Nope," the man said, "It isn't always this quiet. Sometimes there are as many as four or five people here at once." He nodded toward the store next door. "And that's not counting the two women or the boy, or Josh Riddle who runs the saloon."

"It sounds like a roaring town," Curt observed.

The old man kept up a steady rocking. "No, it's not like it used to be. There used to be five thousand people here, but you couldn't tell it now. Most of the buildings were torn down and dragged up the mountains to Azurite. When that petered out they took 'em over to Ophir and Telluride. Reckon they'll stay there for a spell."

"Who're the four or five people you were talking about?"

The old man stopped rocking and looked over at Curt. "You looking for somebody?"

Curt drew tobacco and paper from his coat and began to roll a cigarette. "Just wondering," he said.

The old man had gotten jumpy all of a sudden, Curt mused. He watched from lowered brows as the old-timer resumed his rocking. There was a new, wary light in the old eyes that was puzzling.

He waited a while and then said, "What in blazes are two women doing in this place?"

"Running the store. They came here with old Sam Bentham before Silver Ledge died, and they stayed on to take care of the travelers. They had no place else to go. Old Sam was sick all the time, and when he passed on they just stayed—Mrs. Bentham, Sue, and Foss."

"Foss?"

Again the old man stopped rocking and looked over at Curt. "The boy, Foster Bentham," he said. He squinted. "You're a curious critter."

Curt shrugged. "Just passing the time of day."

Squeak, squeak went the boards as the chair started to move again. "Call me Lute Evans," the old man said.

"Curt Perris."

They sat in silence then as the shadow of the mountain across the way crept toward the hotel. Eventually it engulfed the old building, and immediately the air grew chill. There was sun on only the topmost trees on

the hills behind the hotel when the three riders rode in from up the valley.

Curt's interest quickened immediately, but he remained in his chair, a cigarette hanging from his lips. The old man said nothing, either, but his rocking lost rhythm for a moment when he saw the men.

They were grim faced and weary looking. One of them lifted his hat and scratched his head, his eyes raking over the two men on the hotel porch. A thatch of almost-white blond hair covered his head. His face was sunburned, his clothes dirt stained. One of his companions leaned toward the blond man and said something in a low voice, his eyes on Curt. He was a burly individual with small dark eyes. The third man was lean and scowling. All three looked as if they had been on the road for some time.

The men stopped before the saloon and went inside. Presently the blond one came out again, hiked down to the river, and splashed water on his face. He dried on his bandanna and then climbed back to the street again, where he crossed and entered the general store.

Curt fumbled in his pockets and said, "Reckon I need some tobacco."

Lute Evans watched him go down the steps and walk past the porch.

SUE BENTHAM

CURT PERRIS

When he disappeared inside, the old man spat over the rail and moved from his chair. He tottered inside the hotel, shaking his head.

CURT stepped into the store. It held the same musty smell as had the hotel, but mingled with it were other smells. The stock was small. Canned goods lined the shelves. There was a barrel of flour at one end of the counter. Lanterns hung from the rafters. There were prospectors' picks and several axes leaning against the side wall.

The blond man looked around when Curt entered. He had been leaning on the counter, talking to the girl on the other side. He scowled as he studied Curt with his gray-granite eyes. Around his middle he wore a revolver and belt. He was chewing on a piece of candy he had obviously filched from a jar nearby. Curt studied him as he walked to the counter. The blond one turned back to the girl.

"Did you miss me while I was gone, Sue?" he asked in a low voice.

The girl glanced at Curt and then back at the man before her. She looked worried but she said, "I—I—of course I missed you, Whitey."

She didn't look it, Curt thought. Then he said, "I'd like some tobacco, ma'am."

She started down the aisle behind the counter but Whitey took her arm and stopped her. "The lady is busy," he said, drawing her back around until she faced him again.

Curt watched Sue Bentham. She was frightened now, he noted. She was a pretty girl, perhaps twenty, with a smooth complexion that didn't go with this hard country. She wore a bright gingham dress with a modest bodice that couldn't hide the curves beneath.

Her hair was brown and long, and her large eyes, matched it in color. Her lips were parted slightly as she looked at Whitey.

"All I want is tobacco," Curt said innocently. "It'll only take a minute."

Whitey straightened up and turned until he was facing Curt. He was broad shouldered, a tough-looking customer. His lips curled and he said, "What are you doing in town?"

Curt looked surprised. "Traveling," he said.

"Then get about it."

Whitey turned back to Sue until Curt spoke again. "I came here for tobacco."

Whitey looked at him again and sighed. He seemed to consider something for a moment, then he sighed again. "All right," he said, "give him the tobacco, Sue."

Sue took the pouch off the shelf and dropped it on the counter before Curt. He paid her, smiling pleasantly at her. She frowned, and he got the idea she was trying to warn him. He turned away and sauntered around the room, looking at the supplies.

"What do you want now?" Whitey demanded.

Curt said over his shoulder, "Nothing."

"Then get out." The words came angrily, demandingly.

"Are you the owner of the store?"

Whitey muttered something under his breath.

Curt turned and said, "What's that?"

Whitey strode across the room toward him. "I guess I'll have to throw you out."

Excitement rode high in Curt, and he admitted to himself that this was what he had come into the store for in the first place—a fight and a look at Sue Bentham. He had liked what he saw when he looked at Sue, and now he relished this fight. He had been at war inside himself since leaving Durango, and now he had a chance to give vent to his feelings.

His mild attitude didn't change. He stood in a half slump, his arms hanging limply at his sides. As Whitey drew close he even seemed to cringe a little. But then he exploded into action. He clenched his fist and swung at the point of Whitey's chin. The blow connected and the big man staggered backward. Then Curt was on him, punching now at Whitey's unprotected stomach.

But, Whitey was strong. He was knocked against the counter but he shoved to one side, his right hand streaking for the gun at his waist. Curt kicked at the hand, and the revolver went spinning across the counter and dropped to the floor behind. Whitey howled and lunged forward, a huge fist smashing into the side of Curt's head.

The blow made him see bright lights, and he had to back off. Whitey followed, pounding both fists with pistonlike precision at Curt. Perris tasted blood. He backed into the flour barrel and Whitey stabbed at his chest. They both went over, and flour gushed out on the floor. A white cloud of flour dust rose around both men.

Whitey leaped on top of the fallen Curt. He grabbed a handful of hair and began to pound his head on the floor. Curt's fingers touched flour, and he grabbed a handful and flung it into Whitey's face. The big man jerked away, pawing at his eyes, and Curt twisted under him, pulling free. They both rose at the same time.

Curt jabbed viciously at Whitey. From the corner of his eye he saw a curtain part behind the counter. Another woman came out to stand beside Sue. That would be Mrs. Bentham.

Then Whitey backed away under Curt's onslaught, and Curt gave him his undivided attention. He kept pounding blows at the big man, but Whitey would not go down. Whitey staggered, and tripped over a large coil of rope that lay on the floor near the wall. He put out his hand to steady himself and Curt drove his fist into the man's face. He felt the nose smash under the blow. Blood spurted over Whitey's clothes.

Whitey's reaching hand found something to grab—a miner's pick. He swung the implement at Curt's head with all his strength. Curt saw the blow coming and threw up his right arm to ward it off, ducking at the same time. The pick handle hit his arm a numbing blow, and the point of the pick stopped inches away from his head.

Curt backed away, shaking his arm, and Whitey followed, the pick held before him. His gray eyes were glacial. He licked blood from his lips in anticipation as he hefted the pick. Halfway across the room, Curt stopped.

Whitey eyed him, his chest heaving from the exertion of the fight. He was carrying the pick in both hands still hefting it. Curt crouched and waited.

WHEN Whitey started to draw back with the weapon, Curt sprang, reaching for the pick. His hands closed over the handle and they swayed, straining against each other. Curt pulled it toward the floor slowly. Down it went, until it was no higher than his knees. It was then that Whitey let go and lunged, but Curt was waiting. With both hands still on the handle, he brought the pick up before him as hard as he could. The handle caught Whitey on the point of the chin as he came forward. There was the crunch of bone against hardwood, and Whitey went down heavily on his back. He didn't move after he hit the floor.

Curt straightened up, still holding the pick, gasping for breath. One down and the rest of the world to go, he thought crazily. He looked at the instrument in his hands for a moment and then leaned it against the front of the counter. When he looked up his eyes met those of Sue Bentham.

The girl was frightened. For some reason it upset him and he said, "It's over with. You can relax now."

"It isn't over with," she said in a taut voice. "It's only just begun. Now they'll all come—"

"Sue!" Mrs. Bentham said sharply, cutting off the girl's words.

She looked at her mother, and Curt followed her gaze. Mrs. Bentham was frightened, too, he noted. And he had the feeling that the older woman had interrupted her daughter for fear she would say too much. Too much about what?

Whitey groaned and rolled on his back. Curt went to him and grabbed the collar of his shirt. He started for the door, dragging the big man behind him.

"No, don't do that," Sue cried.

Curt shoved open the door and pulled Whitey on to the rotting boards of the sidewalk. There he let him drop again, and then went back inside.

"Did you want that hulk lying in the middle of your store?" Curt asked. He saw the broken flour barrel. "How much do I owe you?"

Mrs. Bentham said, "Never mind about that."

The curtain over the door into the back of the store stirred, and Curt caught sight of a bright plaid shirt. His curiosity rose another notch. He went back to the counter and leaned forward over it, but he couldn't reach the curtain. It stirred again and he heard soft steps receding from the doorway.

With a grim smile he rounded the end of the counter, brushing past a startled Sue Bentham, and jerked back the curtain. Behind were the family living quarters. There was a stove in one corner, several chairs, and an old, nearly threadbare rug. In the middle of the room stood the man with the bright plaid shirt.

Curt went across the room in two steps and grabbed the flannel material in his fist. "What do you want here?" he demanded.

The man was thin and young. Curt doubted that he was over twenty at the most. He cringed away, and then the two women were pulling at Curt's arms.

"You let go of him," Sue said, tugging at Curt. "That's my brother."

Curt let his hand drop. "Your brother? This was the man I saw coming over the mountain ahead of me."

The youth's voice came, high-pitched with fright. His face was a pale yellow. "No, I wasn't over in Durango," he said. "I've been here all the time." A bit of nerve seeped back into him and he said, "Who are you, anyway?"

"My name's Curt Perris, if that'll help."

The youth looked blank, and Curt turned to the women who were standing nearby. "Why is he lying?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

But Sue said, weakly, "He's not lying."

Curt shrugged and turned toward the door. If they were determined to hold that Foster Bentham hadn't been out of town, who was he to argue? He knew different, but he couldn't see any use in fighting over it. He'd come into the store seeking an outlet for his bitterness and anger, and he had found it. Now it was time to leave again.

At the curtain, he looked back. Some of the color had returned to Sue's face and his eyes lingered on her until she looked away.

"It doesn't make any difference to me where he was, ma'am," Curt said. "I just thought he was the man you were scared of."

"You mean you're not looking for Foss?" Sue asked in amazement.

"No. Should I be?"

"Don't say any more, Sis," Foss Bentham said sullenly. He looked at Curt and told him with obvious relish, "You'd better ride out, stranger. Whitey Morgan isn't going to like you at all."

"Don't push your luck, Bentham," Curt told him. "Your sister and mother saved your hide."

He went on through the doorway and let the curtain drop behind him. When he reached the street, Whitey Morgan was gone from the sidewalk. He crossed the street and hiked down the path that led to the river.

The sound of the swiftly running water was strong here, a kind of rumbling noise like large boulders rolling in an empty cavern. In the half light of evening, he squatted and splashed water on his bruised face.

Curt's glance swept the rest of the valley, which was only a quarter of a mile wide at that point. He noted that there was good bottom land as far as he could see, but he had not noticed a sign of cattle. He guessed that nobody had had time for cattle in the mad rush for the silver and gold in the surrounding mountains.

Finding a large rock, he sat down on it and drew out tobacco and paper. Across the valley to the west, the sky was steadily darkening. He looked to the north, up the valley, and saw the last rays of sun on the topmost peaks of Saddle Mountain.

THIS was peaceful country, he reflected as he lit up. If a man brought in cattle, he would find a ready market in the mining towns along the valley. He wouldn't even have to build himself a house right off, for there were so many deserted cabins that a man could be downright choosey about where he lived.

What are you dreaming about, he asked himself. He didn't even have enough money to buy two cows, much less a whole herd. He flipped the cigarette into the river and got to his feet. Tomorrow he'd ride on, as usual. But this time the idea didn't set too well. He thought of Sue Bentham for a minute, wondering why she and her mother were frightened.

Gravel rattled behind him and he turned, his right hand dropping to the revolver at his waist. But it was Sue. She was carrying a wooden bucket as she came toward him. Her eyes were on the ground and she didn't see him until she was almost upon him. When she did, she sucked in her breath with a startled gasp, and a small, hoarse sound escaped her lips.

"Kind of jumpy, aren't you?" Curt observed, a smile on his lips.

"I thought you were somebody else," she said.

"Whitey Morgan, maybe?"

She nodded, and started to pass him. He caught the scent of her perfume, and it prompted him to act. He reached out, touching her bare arm, and said, "What are you scared of, Miss Bentham? If it's Whitey Morgan, I can soon fix that for you."

"No," she said quickly. She put the bucket on the gravel at their feet and faced him. "If you weren't following Foss, then why did you come here, Mr. Perris?"

"So your brother was on that trail today," Curt said.

She hadn't meant to let that out, he knew, and his curiosity grew. At the same time he told himself it was foolish to get entangled in business that wasn't his own. But the girl intrigued him, and he found himself wanting to know more about her.

She nodded in answer to his question. "You knew it anyway," she said. She reached for the bucket again. "For your own health, I suggest you don't wait until morning to ride on."

She went down to the water and dipped the bucket in. Full of water, it was a heavy load, and he watched her struggle up the bank toward him. When she was close he said, "Seems to me that's man's work. What's the matter with Foss?"

Her voice was tight with the strain of carrying the bucket. "I don't know why you can't mind your own business, Mr. Perris," she told him. "I've been doing this for years."

"This is my business," he said wryly, "because now I'll have to carry the bucket."

He took the handle, and their hands touched. She glanced at him quickly and then looked away, dropping her hand from the handle. They went side by side up the slope to the street, and crossed to the store.

"I'll take it here," she said firmly, and he relinquished his hold.

Without another word, she went inside and closed the door. He looked after her, his hand going to the scar on his temple. She was determined that he wasn't going to enter her life, he decided. Well, there was not much chance of that, anyway, when he was riding out the next day.

Yellow light spilled out from the saloon across the street. He stood on tiptoe and peered inside, seeing only one man at the scarred bar. It was one of the riders who had come into town with Whitey Morgan earlier that day. He wondered idly where Whitey and the other men were. Then he passed on and mounted to the hotel porch. The rhythmic squeak of a rocker off to his right told him that Lute was in busines at the old stand.

"You're wasting your time, son," came the wheezy voice of the old man. "That girl has a mind of her own."

Curt sauntered down the porch until he was near Lute. There he perched on the railing facing the old man. "What are she and Mrs. Bentham scared of?"

"Hunh!" Lute grunted. He kept on rocking and Curt waited for an answer. After some time it came. "Have you ever heard the story about a wolf in sheep's clothing? That's what they have."

Curt puzzled over this answer. He wanted to ask Lute to clarify it, but he figured he'd get no more answers. This town of Silver Ledge seemed to have an undercurrent flowing, something he could feel but not touch with the finger of his mind.

Presently Lute asked, "Are you leaving tomorrow, son?"

"Yep. Guess I'll drift up the valley and see what's there."

Lute waved an arm and said, "Move aside."

Curt did as he was told, and the old man spat over the railing. Then he resumed his rocking and said, "You'd be a sight smarter to leave before then."

Curt was suddenly tired of this sparring around. He walked to the chair and put a foot on one of the runners. Lute stopped rocking.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Curt asked, his voice firm, penetrating.

When Lute didn't answer, anger began to stir deep inside him. He reached down and grabbed the old man's shoulder, and was startled at the thinness of it.

Lute said quietly, "There's not much to me, is there? Do you want to fight me like you did Whitey Morgan?"

Curt dropped his hand away again, then slid his foot off the runner of the chair. Immediately, the squeak of the floor boards took up again. He turned away and headed for the front door. Why get all worked up over nothing? he asked himself.

The lobby was dismal in the yellow light of a dirty lamp that stood on the desk. He went past and climbed the steps to the second floor. The light there was so faint he had to feel his way along. He reached the door to his room and hesitated. What for? He remembered looking into the saloon and seeing only one man there. Then he shrugged. He was getting as bad as Sue and Mrs. Bentham.

HE SHOVED open the door and went inside, reaching for matches. The lamp was on the chest against the wall. He was halfway across the room when the door closed with a loud report. He jumped, startled and whirled as something descended on his head. His hat partly cushioned the blow, and he struck out without really seeing anything but the vague outline of another man. His fist connected and he heard a grunt. Then somebody else came at him from the side, grappling for a hold on his arms.

Curt twisted and backed away, but the faint light from the window was behind him, outlining him for the two men. The barrel of a pistol raked across his cheek and his anger churned. He reached for the revolver at his side and found his holster empty. In that moment of wrestling with one of his attackers he'd lost his gun to the man.

"Rush him," one of the men growled, and Curt thought he recognized Whitey's throaty voice.

They both hit him at once and he was

driven against the front wall of the room. He brought his knee up and hit nothing, then drove his right hand forward, low, and his fist sank into a man's belly. He heard air leave the man's lungs. Then there was only one attacker on him. He began to throw rights and lefts in a rhymical pattern, driving the man away from him.

But he forgot about the other one, and this time when the gun barrel descended on his head there was only his hair to take the force of the blow. Vari-colored lights shot across his field of vision and he sagged to the floor, not unconscious but unable to move for the moment.

"Light the lamp," somebody ordered.

There was a pause and then the sputtering of the match. Soon the room was bathed in yellow light and Whitey Morgan stood over him, grinning through bruised lips. The other man was one of the riders who had come into town with Whitey.

"Quite a fighter, aren't you?" Whitey said. He hefted the revolver in his hand. "Let's see how much you can really take."

He whipped the gun around, cracking Curt viciously on the side of the face. Pain ripped through him as he sagged against the wall behind him. He felt the warm flow of blood and stared up at Whitey through the blue haze of half-consciousness. The big man came forward, flourishing the gun, his eyes ablaze with hate. But the other man stepped in. He said, "He's no good to us dead, Whitey."

Some of the lust left Whitey's face and he nodded, shoving the revolver back into the holster. "All right, Perris. Where is it?" he demanded harshly.

Curt sat up groggily and looked at Whitey's feet for a moment. He couldn't lift his head any higher. His hand went to the old scar on his temple and then moved down to the gash on his cheek.

"What?" He hardly recognized his own voice.

Whitey leaned forward and slapped him with the palm of his hand. The stinging sensation brought Curt back to his senses.

"Where is it?" Whitey's voice was taut with impatient anger.

This time Curt shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Whitey looked at his companion. His voice pleasant as he said, "He's stubborn, too, Big Jack."

Big Jack nodded, and kicked Curt in the ribs. Pain shot through Curt but he tried to get to his feet, a red fury giving him strength. But Whitey wasn't through with him. He clubbed him to the floor again, using his fist, smashing it down at the base of Curt's neck.

"I'll ask you once more," he ripped out. "Where is it?"

Curt stared up at him dumbly, understanding that they wanted to know something; but what that something was he didn't know. Whitey stepped forward again and Curt said crazily, "I threw it out the window."

Whitey reached down, his face dark with anger. He grabbed a handful of shirt and hauled Curt to his feet. He holstered the gun he had been holding and then slapped Curt across the face.

"Are you going to talk?"

Curt glanced behind him at the open window. Big Jack was several feet away. He realized they weren't going to let him out of the room alive, even if he could have told them what they wanted to know. So he must get away from them.

"Maybe you'd like some more of this," Whitey growled, drawing his revolver from its holster again.

Curt acted then. He chopped at Whitey's wrist and the revolver flew from the big man's grasp. At the same time he brought his other arm up, knocking Whitey's hand away from his shirt. He whirled and threw his fist into the face of the slow-moving Big Jack, and then dove for the window.

He had cleared the sash when a gun roared behind him, sending a shower of glass around him. He hit the rotten roof over the porch and went through with a splintering crash. But it broke his fall and he dropped on his side on the porch floor.

Old Lute looked around, startled, and said, "Dang it, we have stairs inside. Why don't you use them?"

Curt got to his feet and ran to the end of the porch. They'd be after him, and without a gun he wouldn't stand a chance. He vaulted the railing and ran up the hill behind the

hotel, sliding in the gravel as he went.

Within a minute he heard shouts. When he looked down on the town, he saw the door of the saloon open. The man who had been at the bar came out and joined his companions. Then the back door of the store opened and a woman was silhouetted in the light. But whether it was Sue or her mother, Curt couldn't tell.

When he reached the top of the mine dump, he stopped to catch his breath. The high altitude made climbing difficult, and his heart was pounding heavily.

He heard one of the men say, "Lute says he went up the old dump."

The old man had put them on his trail, Curt thought, when he could just as easily have thrown them off. Lute had known, too, that Whitey and Big Jack were waiting in his room. Curt would have words with that old man when he got back.

The three men started up the soft slope after him, fanning out, and Curt ran along the level top of the dump. He tripped over a heavy timber and then struggled to his feet again, uttering a silent oath. But the timber gave him an idea. He lifted it and carried it back to the end of the dump. There was a dark shadow some distance below, and he heaved the timber down the slope toward it.

SOMEBODY cried out, and then there was a thrashing sound. He found a measure of satisfaction in it. Now he ran along the dump until he reached the trees of the mountainside. Here he entered and went as fast as he could along a route parallel to the floor of the valley. After moving for some distance, he stopped and listened.

His pursuers were just entering the trees. As he listened, he heard the voices rising above him, and grinned in satisfaction. They thought he had gone up the slope.

As silently as possible he worked his way down to the road again and headed for the hotel. At the edge of the porch he stopped and listened. From up the slope came the sounds of the pursuit, and from the porch came the steady squeaking of the boards.

He climbed over the railing and strode rapidly across the porch. He saw the white blur of Lute's face as the old man strained through the darkness to see who it was. Angry, Curt grabbed his coat and jerked Lute out of the chair.

"You told them which way I went," he growled. "And you knew they were up in my room."

But Lute's voice didn't show any sign of fright. He said, "That's right, son. I have to live in Silver Ledge. If you want to beat up an old man, I guess there's nothing stopping you."

Curt felt his anger begin to subside, but still he held onto Lute's coat. "What are they looking for?" he asked.

"I don't know."

He shook the old man slightly and said, "Tell me."

"I don't know," Lute repeated. "They don't tell me anything."

Curt dropped his hand and considered his next move. He couldn't stay in town, because Lute would tell them everything he knew. But he could use the old man against them without hurting him.

"I'll take your advice about leaving tonight," he said. "I reckon Telluride will be a good deal safer than this town."

He went around behind the hotel to the shed and saddled up. In a few minutes he was riding out of Silver Ledge at a rapid pace, knowing that the sound of his horse would carry far in the still night air.

He rode nearly a mile before he reined in and sent his dun horse into the trees up a narrow draw. After riding a hundred yards or so, he stopped and swung out of the saddle. Perhaps ten minutes later, three horses pounded past the draw. Curt mounted again and rode back to the road. The sound of the horses faded away rapidly, and he turned toward Silver Ledge, a mulish stubborness driving him back to the town. He'd never been run out of town in his life, and he was darned if he was going to let it happen now.

Besides, he remembered two frightened women, and he connected their fright with Whitey and the other two men. One thing he couldn't tolerate was a man bullying a woman, and that was what it appeared Whitey was doing to Sue and her mother. Where Foss Bentham fitted in, if he did at all, Curt couldn't decide.

Whitey thought he, Curt, had something they wanted. Curt grinned at this. If they knew how little he really did have, they wouldn't bother him at all.

Lute wasn't on the porch when Curt came back into town. He put his horse back into the shed behind the hotel and climbed wearily to the second floor. The lamp was still lit in the room and he found his revolver on top of the chest. He blew out the lamp and dropped on the bed, the gun in his hand. Presently he heard Lute's wheezy voice as he said goodnight to somebody and came into the hotel.

Curt went to sleep thinking of Sue Bentham. He was concerned about her, he told himself, but all the time he was remembering the curve of her lips and the sparkle of her dark eyes. Strongest of all was the memory of their hands touching for just a moment on the handle of the bucket, and the way she had looked at him then, with the light of the stars making her eyes sparkle.

He awoke the next morning to the sound of voices. His finger instinctively tightened on the trigger of his revolver before he came awake enough to realize that the voices had come from the street below.

Stiffly, he got out of bed. The side of his face where Whitey had gunwhipped him was tender with throbbing pain, as were his ribs where Big Jack had kicked him. He hobbled to the window, straightening up slowly, and looked down on the street.

The sun was not yet on the town, but its bright rays shone across the valley, putting the trees in sharp relief. The air coming in the window was chill, and he shivered. In the middle of the street stood Sue Bentham, talking to Lute Evans. She wore a full-skirted dress and had a sweater thrown over her shoulders for warmth.

She said, "What was all the shouting about last night?"

"That feller Curt Perris had a run-in with Whitey and the others. Now he's run out."

Curt grinned. They were still unaware that he had come back. Lute went on speaking.

"I reckon Whitey Morgan is dropping down into Telluride by now if his horse didn't give out on the way. He'll ride them until they drop."

Sue turned her head, and Curt could see her face now. She said worriedly, "Do you think they'll find him, Lute?"

The old man shook his head. "That one's too smart for the likes of Whitey Morgan. Whatever it is they're after, he's probably far away with it by now."

At Lute's words, Sue's face seemed to pinch with worry. Curt had the notion that perhaps the girl knew more than she let on. Maybe she knew what it was they were after. He took his hat from the bureau and went downstairs.

LUTE was just settling into the rocker when Curt stepped out of the door. The old man lost his balance in his surprise, and the rocker dipped back as he fell into it until the back hit against the building.

"Where in hell did you come from?" he asked.

Sue turned at the sound of the voice. Sue stood in the entrance to the store next door, her eyes wide, her lips parted slightly.

Curt laughed aloud, and then winced at the pain it caused him. His hand went to the jaw. "I paid for my room in advance," he said. "I'm not one to waste money."

"I'll be danged," Lute exclaimed. "I figured you'd give them the slip, but I didn't think you'd come back here. Whitey will be fit to be tied when he finds out you never got to Telluride."

Curt looked past the hotel owner at Sue. She dropped her eyes but didn't go inside. Curt said loudly, "Where can a man get something to eat in this town?"

Lute scratched his stomach and said, "Well, now. Most everybody that stops here has their own vittles. Those who don't can sometimes get a meal at the Benthams'."

Again Curt speared Sue with a glance, and she started into the store this time, her face a bright red. But before she was gone from sight she motioned to him and he went down the porch steps with alacrity, heedless of the stiffness of his joints.

Before he was out of earshot, Lute said in a musing tone, "You know, young feller, maybe you aren't wasting your time there after all."

The Benthams, all three of them, were nervous in Curt's presence. He sat at a table in

The horse stumbled and fell in the street. Curt dropped down beside it.

one corner of the back room and downed the flapjacks Mrs. Bentham piled on his plate. Behind him, Foss Bentham moved around like a caged animal, looking out first one window and then another. Sue was sewing a rip in one of Foss's shirts, and Curt glanced at her between bites.

"Mighty good eating," he commented presently, and all three people jumped at his voice. He poured syrup over a fresh stack of cakes, then said, "Your friend Whitey gave me an appetite, among other things."

Foss stopped pacing for a moment and stared at Curt. He was about to say something, Curt judged, but the words never came. He began walking again.

"Why did you come back?" Mrs. Bentham asked.

Curt chewed and swallowed. "I guess I'm just a fool for punishment. That and the fact that I don't like to be run out of a town." When he finished talking he reflected that he hadn't spoken the strict truth. He had let Tom Mackey run him out of Durango, even though he hadn't done it with force.

Sue dropped her sewing into her lap and said, "So you'll stay around here until they get back, and then there'll be more trouble."

Curt looked at her and thought she was pretty even with her features drawn in worry. "Maybe," he commented. "But then you're staying, and it strikes me that you're more scared than I am."

Foss Bentham could stay quiet no longer. He stopped in the center of the room, facing the table. "Why shouldn't she be scared?" he asked in a tight voice. "Whitey Morgan took a liking to her. He's here every day, bothering her."

"Foss!" Sue emitted his name in a kind of horrified cry.

He turned to his sister. "It's true and you know it."

"Why don't you all leave, then?" Curt asked, sopping up the last of the syrup with a piece of bread.

He knew the question he'd asked was none of his business, but he was tired of swimming

in the undercurrent of fear that seemed to clutch at these people.

"It takes money, Mr. Perris," Mrs. Bentham put in. "Since Sam, that's Mr. Bentham, died, we haven't seen much money. He came here prospecting, but his health gave out. This store is all we have."

"But we've got—"

Foss didn't finish whatever it was he was going to say because Sue interrupted him by calling his name again. The youth looked shaken, and Curt had the uncomfortable feeling that the youth was going to say that they had money. If that was the case, what were they waiting for?

He shoved back from the table and got to his feet. Foss stood at the window at the side of the room, looking out. His eyes held a kind of fierce look, as if something deep inside him was burning and would not be quenched.

"This is pretty wild country for two women," Curt observed. "Mining country isn't the safest in the world."

Sue looked up from her mending. "You talk as if you had spent time in mining towns."

Curt nodded. "I have. Also in cowtowns, river towns, trail towns, in fact just about any kind of town you could name." He finished talking with a smile. "This is hard country for a woman alone, but good country for a woman with a man."

Sue blushed furiously, and Curt felt his own blood rising as the words he hadn't meant to say came out. Mrs. Bentham gave him a kind of speculative look. Then Foss spoke up.

"There's another rider," he exclaimed. His voice rose in pitch. "He's wearing a star!"

Mrs. Bentham inhaled quickly, and Sue dropped her sewing again. Curt, startled at first, and now growing angry, strode to the window, but the rider had already passed on to the hotel. Curt turned and went through the curtained doorway, and was soon on the street. The rider was still astride his horse, talking to Lute Evans on the porch. It was Sheriff Tom Mackey.

HE TURNED when the door slammed behind Curt, and squinted in his direction. He said sourly, "Might have known you'd be here."

Curt strode up beside the lawman's horse. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Running out of Durango like you did. I should have known you'd be in on it, only I didn't think you'd sunk that far."

Curt reached up and grabbed Mackey's shirt sleeve. His face was set in angry lines. "What was I supposed to be in on?" He twisted the flannel material as he spoke.

Mackey pulled away from him, doubt haunting his eyes. "I suppose you'll tell me that you didn't know the Durango Bank was held up."

Curt backed up a step. "Of course I'll tell you I didn't know about it," he exclaimed. "When did it happen?"

"About the time you left town," was Mackey's curt reply. "We followed the gang up the road to Silverton and then lost them. But I found that two horses had been over that old trail north of town. I followed the sign here. You were one of those men."

And Foss Bentham was the other, Curt thought. He nodded in agreement and said, "That's right. You made it so tough for me that I left town. I remembered that old trail, too, and I cut over the mountain until I found it."

Mackey looked uncertain, puzzled. "What do you mean, you cut over the mountain?"

"I rode past the trail a couple of miles and then decided to see if I could find it. I was curious to see this valley again. So I just headed into the mountains until I found it."

Mackey pursed his lips, thinking. Suddenly he said, "Where are the others?"

"What others?" Curt was trying to piece together what he'd found out. But something was still missing—the money.

"There were four of them," Mackey growled. "Two of you came over the trail. Where are the other two?"

"Why ask me?" Curt said. "I'm a thief. Do you think I'll tell you?"

Mackey didn't answer. Something akin to pain was in his eyes as he looked down at Curt. The lawman was tall and lean, with a leather-skinned face and crow-footed dark eyes. He wore a vest with a polished silver star on it. He had been sheriff in Durango for many years.

"All right, Curt," he said. "I'll find out, and I'll take you back with me."

He swung out of the saddle as Curt's voice came harsh and bitter. "That'd give you great pleasure, wouldn't it—taking me back and sending me to prison? Sheriff Tom Mackey sending—"

Mackey whirled and yelled, "That's enough. You'll get what you deserve."

"As always," Curt said savagely. Then he turned away and walked off stiffly.

"You two don't hit it off much," Lute Evans wheezed, and then resumed his rocking when Mackey speared him with a glance. But now there was a new light in the old man's eyes, and he nodded his head as he rocked.

"There's a shed out in back for that horse, if you're fixing to stay," Evans said presently. "How much did they get away with?"

"Twenty thousand dollars," Mackey told him, and then led the horse around to the back.

It was late in the afternoon, with slanting sunlight pouring through the window into his room, when Curt heard the footsteps in the hallway. He was lying on his back on the bed and would have gotten up, except that the noisy springs would have given him away. So he just slipped his revolver out of its holster and lay looking at the door.

He had been thinking for more than an hour. And as he had reached his conclusions he had grown empty inside. Then bitterness had rushed in to fill the void. He had fingered the scar on his temple, and the memories that brought added bitterness. He was able to arrive at only one conclusion, even though he tried to find some other answer. There was none.

Whitey, Big Jack, the other man whose name he had never learned, and Foss Bentham, had committed the robbery in Durango. By coincidence, he had left town just before it happened, riding north on the road to Silverton. He had gone past the cut-off to the trail over the mountains, and then had cut back off the road. That was the reason he hadn't seen Whitey and the other two riding hard up the road. And that was how Foss Bentham had gotten ahead of him on the trail.

Foss was carrying the money, of that he was positive. Whitey had sent the youth over the trail, figuring that if the posse did catch the three men, they wouldn't have the money on them and wouldn't be held. Foss had brought the money to Silver Ledge as ordered, only he hadn't wanted to give it up when Whitey came for it.

The youth must have told Whitey that he, Curt Perris, had taken it from him on the trail over the mountains. It didn't figure that he would have hung around Silver Ledge if that had been the case but Whitey, in his rage, hadn't bothered to reason that out. The outlaw had apparently believed the youth, maybe because he thought the boy was afraid to lie. That was why he had come after Curt in the hotel.

The part that wrenched at Curt was that Sue and her mother were helping Foss in his deception. They wanted that money as badly as he did, and they didn't care who they hurt to keep it.

He vowed grimly that they had another think coming if they thought that money was theirs. He was one up on Whitey Morgan and the others—he knew now who had the money. And that money would buy a lot of ranch somewhere, and a lot of cattle to stock it. To hell with the whole lousy bunch of them. Curt would get that money and vamoose where old Tom Mackey would never find him.

NOW he listened to the soft footsteps outside the door, and his hand tightened on the grip of his sixgun. The door came open slowly. Somebody backed into the room, looking behind him down the hallway to see if he was followed.

"Looking for something?" Curt boomed out, raising the revolver.

Mackey jerked around, startled, a sheepish look on his face. "I thought you were out," he said in chagrin.

Curt relaxed his grip on the gun. "So I see," he said, grinning at Mackey's discomfort. "You wanted to make sure I didn't have the money up here." He waved at the room. "Go ahead and look, Sheriff. Any money you find here is yours."

Mackey did as he was bid, pulling open the bureau drawers and looking under the bed. He found nothing but dust. When he was through he stood near the bed, a sour expression on his face.

"Who did that to your face?" Mackey asked. "The old man?"

"Very funny. I fell down a mine shaft."

Mackey squinted, studying the bruises on Curt's face. "Looks like somebody slugged you with the barrel of a gun," he observed.

Curt sat up, fingering the old scar. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" he remarked savagely. He ran his hand up and down the old scar. "I've had this to remind me of what you did."

There was a pained expression in Mackey's eyes as he listened to Curt's bitter tirade. He rubbed the palms of his hands on his trousers and then turned away.

"A man can make a mistake," he said softly.

"You don't really believe that," Curt said in disgust. "If you did, you wouldn't have treated me like dirt when I came back. Come off it, Tom. You've been the law so long your heart has turned to paper and printing. All you can see is what's written in the book." Curt paused, then added, "I haven't got the money."

"I believe that now," Mackey said. "But I think you know where it is."

"Maybe." Curt faced the lawman, a grim smile on his face. "I'll give you a warning, Sheriff. I'm going after that money, and when I get it I'm taking it with me."

"You'd betray your own men?" Mackey went to the door of the room and pulled it open. He said, as if each word were tearing away from inside him, "My bullets will kill as fast as anybody's."

"Not if they don't hit anything," Curt snapped.

Mackey went out, closing the door behind him. Curt strode to the window and looked out on the street, his mind a turmoil of emotion and uncertainty. He watched as Mackey went up the street to the store and entered. The man was too old for the job, he thought. He was pushing fifty and still trying to hold down a job meant for a man half his age. Whitey and the rest of that gang would make short work of him. This thought stirred an uneasiness within Curt. But Mackey asked for it, he told himself.

He thought back over four years to the day of that other robbery. He'd been just nineteen then, a wild kid feeling the oats of budding manhood. Jobs had been scarce and he'd wanted money, so he'd held up the emporium. It had been a sloppy job, for he hadn't planned it well. Before he had gotten out of town Mackey had caught him. That was when Curt had gotten the scar on his forehead. In a fit of rage the sheriff had slugged him with the barrel of his revolver, opening an ugly gash on his temple. Curt had left Durango soon after that.

He had stayed away nearly four years, drifting from job to job, always remembering. Then he'd gone back to Durango, determined to make a new start, but Mackey hadn't let him. All right, he thought now. I'll make a start with twenty thousand dollars. The Benthams had that money, and it wouldn't be hard to take from them once he found out where it was.

He thought of Sue, and it galled him to reflect that he had been taken in by her, to the extent that he'd felt sorry for her lonely existence in Silver Ledge. All along, she and her brother and mother had been planning a doublecross on Whitey and the other two men who had committed the robbery. When Curt had come he'd been a handy one to use as a scapegoat. It would have worked, too, if he had run out of town as they expected.

The sound of horses drew his attention and he leaned out of the window, looking up the valley. Not far away he saw Whitey, Big Jack, and the other man coming. They were as dusty and trail weary as the first time he had seen them. And now his job would be more difficult. They'd know within a few minutes that he was in town. His life wouldn't be worth much from now on, he realized. The thought didn't put fear in him, but rather a sort of reckless abandon. He checked the load in his sixgun and then planned his strategy.

IT WAS dark when he left the room. He went across the hall and into one of the rooms there. It smelled strongly of old age and disuse. The window, which faced on the hill behind the hotel, came open with a loud complaint, and he waited, listening. There was no sound from below, and he climbed out onto the roof of the shed.

He crouched there. It was nearly pitch black, and it was a few minutes before he made

out objects around him. Above, on the mountain, the old tailings dump was a dark ghost watching over the town. To his right was the store owned by the Benthams; to his left, an old tumbledown building.

He made his way down the sloping roof to the edge, and dropped off. His horse stood hipshot in a stall nearby. He went to it and saddled up quickly, then led the animal out of the stall and tied the reins to a bush. When this was done he walked carefully toward the store.

A light was lit in the living quarters at the rear. Curt moved up close and looked into the room. This was the part of his plan he didn't like, but it had to be done.

Mrs. Bentham sat sewing in a chair near the lamp. He studied the rest of the room and saw nobody else. Mrs. Bentham turned her head, and he saw that she had been crying, for her eyes were red-rimmed and she was having trouble concentrating on her task.

He considered this, not liking it. A change in emotion might mean a change in other things. He went around to the back door and looked through the glass there, ready to enter.

"What is it you want?" It was Sue's voice, sounding brittle.

He turned, startled, his right hand automatically reaching for the revolver at his side.

"You won't need that," she told him.

He realized he was silhouetted in the light from the door. Letting his hand drop, he walked toward her. Beside her on the ground was a dishpan that she had just finished emptying. In the faint light he saw that her eyes were glistening with tears.

The sight filled him with compassion and he wanted to comfort her somehow, until he thought about the money. Then the old bitterness rose in him. This Sue Bentham was no angel.

"I want the money," he told her. "You have it."

She laughed, but there was a rasping sound to it. "Everybody wants the money," she said in disgust. "It's not worth going through what you're going through."

"Not when you don't have to," he told her shortly. "You should know about that. Where is the money, inside?"

She didn't answer for a while, but instead looked up at the stars overhead. He studied the smooth curve of her neck as he gazed upward, and a new emotion rose inside him. He wanted to touch, to hold her close just once. He was starting to reach for her when she spoke.

"What do you think the money will bring you?" she asked. "Happiness?" She sniffed and shook her head. "We had the money, and we're not happy. You must have seen my mother crying inside."

"What do you mean you *had* the money?"

She looked at him, still refusing to answer his questions. "That kind of money is no good. What would you do, run away somewhere?" She shook her head. "You'd always remember where the money came from."

He grabbed her shoulders. "I'd buy a ranch, and I'd remember where the money came from. And every time I remembered I'd laugh because of the way I got it—right out from under the noses of the law and the men that stole it."

She winced under the pressure of his grip but didn't struggle to get loose. Her chin was high and defiant when she spoke. "You hate the world, don't you? You hate Sheriff Mackey because he's the law and the law won't let you take what you want."

"That's not the only reason I hate him," he said, his voice thick with his rising anger. "I hate him for what he's done to me, his own son."

Her breath came in a quick gasp and she stammered, "He's—he's your father? But your name—"

"I changed mine when I left Durango four years ago. I didn't want to be any part of a Mackey. I'm not a son to him, I'm a man who went wrong." His breath came rapidly as he talked, and his chest rose and fell. He glared at the white oval of her face, while conflicting emotions warred inside him. He drew her to him. "You're no better than I am," he said huskily. "We could go a long way with that money."

Before she could answer, he bent his head and kissed her lips. She didn't move or try to get away, but neither did she return the kiss. He tasted the salt of new tears, and lifted his head.

She moved away from him, and when she

spoke it was in a dead voice. "I don't have the money any more. Your father took it."

A gun roared, cutting off her words, and Curt felt a tug at the sleeve of his shirt. He saw the lance of the muzzle blast, some distance up the hill, and he jumped forward, shoving Sue into some brush. Then he raced past the light of the door again and drew a second shot, this one away from the girl.

He fired twice in the direction of the gun and then dropped to the ground, flat on his stomach. There came the rattle of gravel and a thrashing in the brush, and he fired again. Now the sound was rising above him, up the slope. He strained in the darkness to find his target. Then for just a second he saw the man, silhouetted against the sky as he gained the top of the mine dump. He was gone and Curt got to his feet.

"Who was that?" Sue asked weakly, coming out of the brush.

"Probably one of Whitey Morgan's men, who was listening to us. As soon as he heard he tried to get rid of me."

Her eyes were frightened. "But what was he doing there?"

CURT traced the scar on his forehead, thinking. Finally he said, "Whitey must have figured I don't have the money. It should be obvious even to him by now. So the only people left were you and Foss and your mother. Whoever it was was probably about to try to make you talk, when I came along."

She shivered and wrapped her arms about herself. Mrs. Bentham opened the back door and cried out, "Sue, are you all right?"

"Yes, mother," she said. She looked back at Curt. "What are you going to do now?"

"What do you think? Find where Tom put the money and then get out of here."

He started to turn away, but she grabbed his arm. "Think what you're doing," she implored. "There will be no turning back once you've committed yourself."

He pulled away from her, and his laugh was brittle. He said, "You're a fine one to lecture me. You tried to keep the money and you lost it."

He turned and strode off, rounding the building and heading for the street, thinking. Tom was getting old, but his mind was just as sharp as it had always been. He had figured things out right away and had wasted no time in getting the money.

Curt walked the length of the hotel and then stopped. The creaking of Lute Evans's rocker penetrated his mind and he turned back and mounted the stairs to the porch.

"Where'd he go?" Curt demanded of the old man when he was standing beside him.

Lute kept on rocking. "Where'd who go, son?"

"Sheriff Mackey. He was over at the store and then he left, but he's still in town. He wouldn't leave without the men that robbed the bank."

"Going gunning for your own daddy, son?" the old man wheezed. "It doesn't seem right, somehow."

"How did you know about that?" Curt asked sharply.

Lute chuckled. "Sounds carry a long way at night. I heard you and the girl talking. You've taken quite a shine to her, haven't you?"

"Never mind that. Where'd he go?"

Curt was impatient to get going. Sue and her last words kept edging into his mind. He dropped a foot on a runner of the rocker and stopped Lute's motion. The old man looked up at him and sighed.

"All right, there's no need to fly off the handle about it." He raised his voice and said, "They went down the street toward those old buildings."

"They?"

"The sheriff and young Foss Bentham."

Curt whirled and ran down the steps to the street. He had reached the end of the hotel when a gun roared from an old building to his left and a bullet thunked into the corner porch column over his head. He stopped in a crouch and looked across the street.

A voice carried from one of the empty buildings over there. "That's far enough, Curt." It was his father.

Curt searched the building, but couldn't pinpoint the sheriff's position. He took a step forward and again the gun roared. The bullet kicked up dust at his feet. He jerked his six-gun from its holster, intending to throw a shot where he had last seen the flash of his father's gun. But his finger wouldn't tighten on the

trigger, and he re-holstered the gun in disgust.

"What do you want with me?" he shouted across the street.

"Ride out, son," came Mackey's answer, his voice a little less harsh than before. "Foss Bentham told me you weren't in on the hold-up. You're free to go."

He'd take the word of a strange kid, but not that of his own son, Curt thought bitterly. There hadn't been any trust between them since that day four years ago. How could he expect it to start now? He, Curt, was a law-breaker in his father's eyes. And, as a law-breaker, he had to be handled as if he were a rattler. Tom Mackey had let the law become his god, forgetting compassion, living only by the book.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Curt saw something pass between himself and the light from the saloon across the road. As he turned to watch, another figure stole past, then a third. Whitey Morgan had heard the talk and, with what the man behind the store had learned, they were coming to get the money.

Curt turned and sprinted for a deserted building directly ahead. He expected a shot from his father, but it didn't come. He dove through the empty space that had once been a window, and nearly crashed into Foss Bentham.

The youth had a rifle, and he attempted to train it on Curt. But Foss was inexperienced and not a little frightened. Curt grabbed the barrel and shoved it away.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Foss said nothing. Curt drew his revolver. "Who has the money?"

Evidently his voice carried across the street, for Tom Mackey shouted, "Tell him where it is, Foss. Don't take any chances."

The street erupted flame and sound as three guns fired almost at once. When none of the bullets entered the building where he was, Curt realized they were gunning for Tom.

Silence dropped like a curtain over the dark street again. Foss Bentham said in a hoarse whisper, "It's in the back in a couple of saddlebags. The sheriff figured to draw attention away from this building. He didn't know you'd come here by accident."

Curt started toward the back and then halted again. "You'd better get out of here, kid. If Whitey doesn't get you, the law will. You'll spend a good part of your life behind bars."

"The sheriff said—"

"Don't believe what he said," Curt interrupted. "The law is the law. You'll get what's coming to you."

When the youth still didn't move, Curt turned and ran to the back of the empty building. He found the saddlebags and headed for the door.

"Don't be a fool, kid," he said before he went out.

There was no answer.

BETWEEN the building and the hotel there was a narrow walkway. Curt halted and peered down its length. He saw nothing, and went on to sling the saddlebags on his horse. He swung upward into the saddle and kicked the mount into motion. In a run, he passed behind the old building and angled for the road.

He hit the street going full tilt. Vaguely he made out the shapes of the three men in the street as he went past them. There was a shout from one of the men and then three guns blazed into action. But they were shooting blind, and he made himself a small target by leaning over the neck of his horse.

For some time he pushed the dun, wanting to get as much distance between himself and his pursuers as possible. It would take them a little time to saddle up and get after him, but that wouldn't give him any too much head start.

The dun was a powerful horse and had proved himself more than once, although not in such a way as this. Curt rode for an hour as fast as he dared, finally passing through a gathering of shacks that had once been the town of Azurite.

The road grew steeper after this and he had to slow his pace. He figured that the outlaws' horses were tired from their long ride after him that day and the day before, while his own mount was fed and rested. Nevertheless he didn't tarry.

The trail grew narrower now, barely wide enough to let a wagon pass. He rode through an aspen grove and then reached the pines higher up. The air was cold here, with a bite to it that had been lacking in Silver Ledge.

Curt wasn't dressed for it, and knew he was in for a miserable ride before the morning sun warmed him.

For several hours the road wound upward toward the divide, and he began to plan his next move. There was an old trail over the mountains near the divide. It led eastward to the valley of the Animas River and thence to Silverton. It was a well-known trail, but not often used because it was a tortuous route even for a man on horseback. Then, too, if Morgan and the others did find out that he'd taken the trail, it would be hard on their tired mounts. That way he would gain precious time on them.

He looked back at the saddlebags behind him. Twenty thousand dollars. It was more than he had ever seen before in his life. He tried to think of all the things it would buy, but ran out of ideas before he had spent a quarter of it. When an uneasy feeling tried to edge its way into his mind, he pushed it out again. Only one person of all those who knew about the money had been planning to take it back. That person was his father. But this was one time the old man had lost.

Curt was near the summit now. The road forked off to the right toward Saddle Mountain, and he went that way. Within a couple of miles he reached the mining town of Ophir. The first light of dawn was on the town, and he skirted the main street. He wanted no one to say they had seen him pass through.

The air was like vaporized ice up here. It fingered through his shirt as if it wasn't there. His hands on the reins were numb and he had to keep shifting them, putting each hand in turn into the pocket of his trousers to warm it.

Ophir was a town smaller than Silver Ledge had been. It was situated near the timber line, and there were the remains of winter snows in deep ravines on the north slope of the peaks above town. Bald, bare, and gaunt, they thrust upward like old men watching over the foolishness of the town's citizens. He left the place behind and headed toward the east.

The road was only a trail now, winding upward out of the trees to the bare slopes of the divide. He moved slowly, for the dun was tired, and the thinness of the air provided little oxygen for laboring lungs.

The trail led over a high saddle between smooth peaks, from whence the mountain had received its name. Daylight was coming rapidly in this high, silent land. Curt's feet grew numb as the cold increased, and he wondered if this was worth it. But of course it was worth it, he told himself. How else was a man to make twenty thousand dollars in the space of a few hours?

He thought of Sue, of the touch of her lips on his own, of the startled look she had given him when their hands met over the bucket of water. He remembered the warmth of her against him when he kissed her, and the intense coldness around him only made the recollection more vivid.

He neared the divide, thinking, you're a fool. She turned that gang of cut-throats on you so she could keep the money for herself. The horse stumbled and then gained the divide. Curt drew in on the reins and swung out of the saddle, knowing the faithful beast could go no farther without a rest.

The saddle of the mountain was well named. The peaks to the north and south made the horn and the cantle. In the lowest portion, where he had stopped, was the seat. It sloped off in a rounded curve to the east and west. He walked a few feet and looked down his back trail. Far below, partly hidden by trees, was Ophir. There was no sign of movement on the trail below.

He led the weary mount forward, toward the east, until he could see far ahead and below into the valley of the Animas. A bluish mist hid the lower reaches of the valley, so that the peaks toward the east looked like islands floating in the sea of mist. In spite of the intense cold, there was a peacefulness in the scene. He felt aloof, divorced from the world.

But the feeling lasted for only a few seconds, and then his spirits were dragged down in spite of himself by the thought of the money in the saddlebags. He felt that he had left behind all he had ever believed in. But that wasn't all.

Behind he had left his father, Tom Mackey, who would follow the outlaws, dogging them until they grew tired of it and turned on him. He would be no match for them; he was old and weary. Curt's uneasiness grew, but he argued with himself. After all, Tom Mackey

had had no faith in his own son. What did he, Curt, owe his father, when it was the sheriff who had driven him out of Durango?

But that wasn't just right, either. He hadn't had to leave the town. Perhaps, if he had stayed, he would have been given a chance to prove himself. Well, he'd proved himself. He thought of Sue's words to the effect that there would be no chance to rectify his mistake once he had taken the fatal step.

Ahead in the valley was freedom and money, enough to start the ranch he'd always wanted. A man would be a fool to give up all that. But the tug of blood ties was not easily broken. It pulled on him, trying to drag him back.

He was looking to the east, pondering the question, when the sun burst upon him brilliantly. It shoved upward out of a distant valley to the east, blinding, penetrating. Its rays seemed to go right through him, driving away the darkness, lighting his soul so that he had to face the situation squarely. When he had, he knew what he must do.

HE CLIMBED into the saddle and reined about, heading over his back trail, dropping downward toward Ophir. Once he had committed himself, he didn't think about it any more except to savor the absence of the heavy darkness that had been lying within him since he had taken the money.

He heard the shots when he was still some distance from the small mining town. It could be some miner celebrating, but it seemed too early for that. Curt pushed the weary horse as fast as he dared.

He kept telling himself that the firing was due to something else than what was in his mind, but all the time he knew he was just kidding himself.

Tom Mackey had caught the outlaws in Ophir and was making his play. Or perhaps it was the other way around. They had tired of his dogging their steps and had turned on him in anger and frustration at losing the money.

Curt dropped past a mill with its huge dump of waste rock and then he was on level ground, passing the shacks that dotted the area around the central district of the town.

The firing had ceased, and that only added to his worry. He rounded a bend and ahead lay the main street of the town, looking weatherbeaten and old.

There were several horses tied to the hitchracks, but no other sign of life on the street. His horse's hoofs made a loud clopping noise as he entered the block-long business district. He was puzzled. The town should be up by this time. And then he saw the faces at the windows—grizzled, bearded miners staring at the street, their eyes turning to watch his approach.

Down the street to his right was the livery stable, its front door yawning open. Across from that was a saloon, the only false-fronted building in the town. The rest of the buildings were low, with no pretense about them. They were in existence for one purpose only —to make money for their owners.

He saw movement in the doorway of the stable and watched it hawk-eyed, his right hand close to the sixgun at his side. He drew closer. Then his father's voice carried out to him.

"Look out, Curt," the old man shouted. Then from that same doorway Mackey's revolver blasted at something across the street.

Before Curt had a chance to act, another gun roared from the direction of the saloon. He felt a tug at the sleeve of his coat, the whisper of death. He dropped down the offside of his horse and hit the street running, but he didn't let go of the reins. There was a staccato roar of guns from across the way, and the horse stumbled and then fell dead in the street.

Curt dropped down beside the beast, a hot anger in him. The dun had become a part of his life over the past years, a faithful animal that had never let him down. He pulled out his revolver and attempted to place the position of his attackers, but they had stopped firing.

Glancing over toward the barn, he saw his father anxiously looking his way. Curt flipped a hand in salute. Tom returned it. It was not far to the stable, and the sheriff's voice carried clearly on the now silent street.

"I figured you'd come back, son," he said. The voice sounded tired as he added, "I wish you'd waited until I had these hombres rounded up."

That was like Tom, Curt thought. He never

even gave a thought to the fact that he might not succeed in what he had set out to do. The odds meant nothing to him, and that was perhaps the reason that he had no compassion for a lawbreaker. The old man always claimed that everyone made his own bed, and how well he made that bed determined how well he slept in it. Now Curt realized his father wasn't far off in that theory.

He shouted, "Isn't there any law in this town? We'll never pin them down this way."

He saw Tom smile thinly. Then he said, "I'm the law, son. I'm sheriff of this county, remember? You won't get any help from the people of this town. It's between us and them."

Curt looked around him. Somebody peered from nearly every window in town, but there had been no attempt to help the law. These men lived for but one thing, the silver that lay in the big, bald mountain over the town. He glanced up at Saddle Mountain from which he had descended, and thought, you made your bed up there, now it's time to sleep in it.

Looking across the street at the saloon, he thought he saw movement there. But it wasn't inside; it was on the roof behind the high false front. His position was such that his line of vision angled up behind the false front. Guessing what the man was up to, Curt untied the saddlebags that held the money, and dragged them to him.

He was ready to shove to his feet when firing broke out from the saloon. Somebody was firing from the doorway of the building. Curt thought it was Whitey Morgan, but he couldn't be sure. Another man was firing from a narrow space between the saloon and the building next door.

Curt heard lead thunk into the body of his dead horse, and turned to look toward the barn. Splinters ripped from the rotten boards as one of the men kept Tom pinned inside. Then the man on top of the saloon appeared among the ornate work on top of the false front. He had a rifle, and he could see directly down on Curt's position.

It was the thin outlaw, the one whose name Curt had never heard. The man raised the rifle, taking aim at Curt. Curt tried to fire without exposing himself too much. He saw that he wasn't going to be in time.

BUT then another gun roared from the direction of the barn, and the man on the false front found he was unable to hold up the muzzle of the rifle. Then he dropped it altogether. His fingers searched for something to grab and didn't find it. He fell, twisting in the air, and crashed onto the packed dirt in front of the saloon.

Curt turned and saw Tom, backed out of sight again, holding his arm, his face white. He grabbed the saddlebags and sprinted for the barn, heedless of the bullets that whined around him. Something knocked one leg out from under him as he reached the door, and he scrambled the rest of the way on all fours.

"You're hit," Mackey said, looking down at the growing dark circle on Curt's trousers.

Curt glanced down, felt the wound for a moment, then got to his feet. "It's not much," he said, looking anxiously at his father. "What about you?"

"He got me in the shoulder when I shot him off the top of the building."

Curt looked at the wound and then up into his father's face. "Thanks," he said. "I didn't deserve that."

For just a moment that old pained look came into Tom Mackey's eyes. Then it left again. He said, "There are horses here. You'd better take one and get out."

"I came back because I knew you were damn fool enough to tackle Whitey Morgan singlehanded," Curt told him, angry that his actions had been misunderstood. "Get out the back and find yourself a doctor. There ought to be one somewhere in this town."

Mackey didn't move, so Curt reached out and shoved him toward the door at the back of the building. He followed his father through and headed him toward the center of town, while he went in the other direction.

The wound in his leg was bleeding worse. It had been deeper than he had let on, although it hadn't touched the muscle. He felt the warm flow turn cold as the blood ran down. Then he was too busy to think about it.

He reached the end of town and cut across the street, not sure that he hadn't been seen. A trash-littered alley ran the length of the town, behind the buildings. Curt ran toward the saloon, intending to get to Whitey through the back door.

He passed the narrow space between the buildings and a gun crashed almost in his face. But he saw the movement in time to change his direction, to throw Big Jack's shot off. He whirled and pumped two shots at the surprised man, who had thought that he couldn't miss at such close range.

Big Jack stared at him dumbly, trying to find the strength to raise his revolver again. But finally he gave up, and bent over slowly as his life flowed out of the holes in his chest. He sagged against the building and slid to the ground. Curt took one last look at him and dashed into the back door of the saloon.

Several frightened faces regarded him as he brandished the revolver in his hand. But Whitey Morgan was not there. Finally, one man motioned toward the doorway, and Curt headed for it. But before he reached the street he heard the pound of a running horse and knew that Whitey had made his getaway.

He went onto the street, limping now as his leg began to throb. The money's not worth it, he thought. Then he was going at a hopping gait across the street to the livery stable. The saddlebags hadn't been touched and he reached over and picked them up.

Mackey's horse stood saddled in one of the stalls. Curt tied the saddlebags behind the saddle and led the horse out. He mounted up and headed out the door, where he was intercepted by a bearded miner. The man reached up and grabbed the reins.

"The sheriff said to let that man go. He said I have to keep you here."

"How is the sheriff?" Curt asked.

The man answered, "Doc says he'll be all right." He looked down at Curt's blood-soaked trouser leg and added, "You'd better go and see the doctor yourself. You're as pale as a ghost. If you don't get that leg fixed, you *will* be a ghost."

Curt dug his heels into his mount's flanks and the horse jumped forward. The reins jerked out of the surprised man's hands and Curt pounded away from the barn, heading down the slope after Whitey. This was something that had to be finished by him and him alone. He owed this to his father, because Whitey was the one who had had Tom pinned inside the barn while the other man reached the top of the false front.

It was fast going down the slope but it was rough, too, as the horse's front feet hit hard at every step. When Curt reached the road to Telluride he turned back toward Silver Ledge, figuring that Whitey would take the fastest way out. He discovered that he had guessed right several minutes later, when he saw the man some distance ahead of him.

They dropped out of the trees and the road leveled off. A cold sweat formed on Curt's forehead and everything went out of focus for a second. He blinked away the sensation, wondering at it, forgetting about the blood he had lost from the wound in his leg.

Both their mounts were tired from the ride up the valley, but Whitey was the heavier man and Curt slowly gained on him. They passed through Azurite and then it became a running gun battle, with Whitey turning to fire back at Curt. But his shots were wild, and when he had emptied his revolver he quit.

It was afternoon when they rode into Silver Ledge. Whitey swung out of the saddle in front of the saloon but he didn't go inside. He shoved cartridges rapidly into the cylinder of his revolver and snapped it back into place.

Curt nearly fell out of the saddle when he attempted to dismount at the far edge of the hotel. Old Lute Evans jumped out of his chair, with more life than Curt thought he was capable of, and hurried into the safety of the hotel lobby.

Whitey triggered off a shot as Curt found the protection of the edge of the hotel porch. The bullet ripped up splinters from the corner post and whined off into space. Curt wiped sweat from his forehead, feeling dizzy. The wound had stopped bleeding but the damage had been done. He was so weak now that he wasn't sure he could stand up much longer.

He grabbed the reins of his horse and pulled the animal into the protection of the hotel. Getting to his feet, he took hold of the saddlehorn, then reached around and slapped the horse's rump. They moved forward, with Curt taking most of the weight off his legs.

AT THE walkway between the hotel and the store, he let go of the horn and staggered toward the street. His revolver was heavy in his hand but he brought it up as he reached the end of the buildings.

Whitey saw him and whirled to meet the challenge. Curt squeezed off a shot. The gun jumped in his weak hand and he nearly lost his hold on it. Whitey didn't go down, and Curt tried to get off another shot, but the hammer clicked on a spent shell.

The street went out of focus and he felt himself sliding down the side of the building. He waited for the shot that would finish him off, to come, but instead a rifle cracked from somewhere nearby. He looked across the street. Whitey staggered backward and crashed through the doors of the saloon, falling on his back so that all Curt could see was his booted feet. Whitey didn't move again.

Curt sat in the walkway, breathing hard. It was good to be off his feet, and a little strength returned to him. A shadow fell across him and he looked up. Foss Bentham stood there, a rifle in his hand. Behind him came Sue and her mother. All three looked down at Curt, white-faced and frightened.

"Are you still here, kid?" Curt said, his voice sounding loud in his own ears. "I thought you'd be gone by this time. You can still make it. Mackey won't be here for a while yet." He rubbed his hands across his eyes. "Much obliged for getting Whitey for me."

"You got him, Mr. Perris," Foss said. "He just didn't want to go down, so I had to help a little."

Sue came past her brother and dropped down beside Curt. "That leg needs attention," she said. She looked up at her brother. "Help me get him into the store."

Curt protested, but they carried him inside. Mrs. Bentham cut away the leg of his trousers, exposing the wound. "Bring me some whisky," she said, and Sue disappeared into the back room. She came out a moment later with a bottle.

Curt said, "The money's out in back on my horse. It'll take you a long way. What are you waiting for?"

Sue handed the bottle to her mother, then said fiercely, "We don't want that money, Curt Perris. What kind of people do you think we are?"

His lips turned downward in a bitter grimace. "You hid the money well enough when you had it."

She started to say more, but her mother stopped her with a motion of her hand. She uncorked the bottle and poured the liquid on the wound. It took a moment for the bite of it to be felt. Then pain shot through him, and it was more than he could take in his weakened condition. The room whirled and he passed out.

When he opened his eyes the first thing he saw was Tom Mackey's anxious face. The lawman had his arm in a sling. His lips parted in a smile when he saw Curt's eyelids flutter. Curt looked around him and saw that he was in the back of the store. The Benthams came over to the bed at a word from Mackey.

Curt looked up at Foss and said weakly, "You haven't got the sense you were born with."

The youth smiled and said, "Maybe not, but there's another man who got away with twenty-thousand dollars and then came back. If I haven't any sense, then he's worse than I am."

Curt looked up at his father. He said, "I reckon you'll take Foss back to be tried."

Tom Mackey nodded. "That's right, son. The law is still the law."

Curt's mouth set and he said, "That's all that you ever cared about—the law."

The older man shook his head. He wiped his hands across his eyes. "I made a mistake with you," he said. "I forgot the law when it came to my own son. I thought I could punish him my own way, and a man never made a worse mistake. I should have let the law take its course on you and then, when you came back from prison, I could have forgotten about it. As it was, I kept punishing you for years. When you ran off with the money, I realized what I'd done."

"But he came back," Sue put in. "Doesn't that count for something?"

Mackey nodded. "Nobody will ever know how I felt when I saw Curt ride back into Ophir after he had had a chance to make a clean getaway."

"What about Foss Bentham?" Curt asked, his voice softening slightly.

"He'll go back to Durango with me, but I'll plead leniency for him. Maybe the judge will only put him on probation. After all, his motive in the robbery was entirely unselfish."

Curt frowned, sensing that something was

coming he hadn't known about, "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Foss took that money hoping to get his mother and sister out of this valley. When they found out about it, they kept the money, hoping to give it back to me in exchange for Foss's freedom." Mackey bent his head slightly and looked at the floor. "I couldn't go that far. I tried to show them what a mistake that would be, and they agreed."

Curt listened, feeling the blood rush to his face. He had accused Sue of greed and selfishness, and all the time she had been sacrificing for her brother.

He looked up at her and said, "I'm sorry, Sue."

She bent over him, putting a finger to his lips. "Don't say that. You couldn't know what was going on. I was afraid to tell you. I should have known better."

He took her hand in his own and drew her down to him. It seemed natural that he should kiss her, and he did. And this time the kiss was returned.

Tom Mackey cleared his throat and they broke apart again, both of them as red as the sunset outside. Mackey said, "I'll be leaving in the morning with Foss. I wish I could do something for you, son."

Curt looked up into the lined face. He said, "You can. You can talk to the bank when you take in the money. I'll want a loan, and your word will help me get it. Tell them Curt Mackey wants to borrow money." He looked at Sue. "Cattle will grow fat in this valley. Do you think you could stand to live here?"

She smiled at him, and her answer was plain in her eyes even before she said, "I'll never want to leave as long as you're here."

She bent and kissed him again, and the others backed out of the room quietly. Silence settled down, and they could have heard old Lute Evans's chair going squeak, squeak, if they had listened for it. But Curt and Sue had more important things to think about just then.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Name the most famous rodeo bucking horse of all time, past or present.

2. In the Old West the names Frontier, Peacemaker, Navy, Lightning, Bisley and Dragoon referred to models or makes of what?

3. Ouray and Chipeta were Chief and Queen, respectively, of what Indian tribe?

4. When an old-time cowhand spoke of someone as "a 160 man," what did he mean?

5. What Western wild animals were almost exterminated in what has been called "the world's greatest slaughter?"

6. Texas ranchers have declared war on buzzards, not only because they often peck newborn calves and lambs to death, but also for what other reason?

7. When a cowboy says a horse has plenty of bottom, what does he mean?

8. In what Western state will you find China, Egypt, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Palestine, Scotland and Sweden?

9. The annual convention of Western Writers of America was held last summer in La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco, a state capital often called City of the Holy Faith. What city?

10. Corral, meaning a cowpen, rhymes with what other six-letter word meaning a nosebag for feeding grain to a horse?

—Rattlesnake Robert.

You will find the answers to these questions on page 66. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

The DEADLINE

WILL WAS A LITTLE MAN, one you'd hardly notice . . . unless you were looking for someone with courage enough to stand up to a threat nobody else dared to face

HE WAS a little guy, not much to look at. Maybe he stood an inch or two over five feet, and he might have weighed close to a hundred and forty pounds. He was probably younger than he looked, say in his late twenties, but his eyes were older than that and there was a tired look in them. His face was lined. It was a face that didn't smile very often. He had a homestead on Four Mile Creek, and worked it alone. He wasn't married.

I don't remember the first time I saw him. People like Will Brubaker don't make a quick impression. They have no color to attract attention, no individuality to set them apart. They are like a familiar landscape which you look at, but don't see.

If you had asked me about Will a little while ago, I might have said, "Oh, yeah. He has a place on Four Mile Creek. He works pretty hard, and makes a living. He's a quiet guy, a decent sort, I guess, but I really don't know much about him."

I would give you a different answer today.

I remember when the trouble started, or rather when we had our first warning of it. A group of us were lounging in the shade of the Emporium in Waggoner, talking of this and that—cattle prices, and the weather, William Jennings Bryan and his chances of being elected, and the new railroad which might be built, up the valley.

It was a warm and pleasant afternoon, and there was a pretty fair crowd in town from the range country. A couple of times I had seen Kathy Keeler on the street. She hadn't been alone, which was understandable. Kathy was young, marriagable, and as pretty as they come. Most of the unmarried men in the county had designs on her. You couldn't blame them.

Our talk and argument had bogged down and I was leaning back up against the store, wondering who would win out with Kathy, when Frank Oldring and some of his boys rode up and reined in at the tie rail. Oldring was new to this part of the country, a stocky man, broad shouldered, heavy. He had a wide and friendly grin, and a booming voice. He had come here about a month before and had bought the Cunningham ranch west of town. It was quite a big spread. Rather decently, I thought, he had taken over Cunningham's crew. He hadn't brought a new crowd in with him.

After they had dismounted and tied their horses, Oldring's boys headed for the Toltec Saloon, but Oldring ducked under the tie rail and started toward the Emporium. Then he saw us and stopped.

"You look mighty comfortable," he said, grinning. "You know, one of these days when I get things straightened around, I'm going to do a little loafing in the shade myself."

"There's nothing quite like it," I said. "We've settled most of the world's problems in the past hour."

Oldring gave us a sample of his booming laugh. He had a round, ruddy face and deep-set dark eyes. He had on a fresh white shirt, newly pressed dark trousers, and fancy boots. The only thing about him which wasn't neat was his gunbelt and holster. Both were old. I had noticed that before. There was a possible significance in it which I hadn't missed, and which I had wondered about.

"Yep, I'll be joining you one of these days," said Oldring.

By

PHILIP

KETCHUM

He glanced toward the door of the Emporium. As he looked that way his face sobered and his grin instantly disappeared. I looked that way too, and saw that the store door had opened and Will Brubaker had come out on the porch. Will was wearing faded blue jeans and a blue shirt. He was lugging a sack of groceries.

"Isn't that Will Brubaker?" said Oldring.

Someone said it was, and Oldring called out, "Hey, Brubaker! I'd like to see you for a minute."

Will glanced at him, nodded, and came toward us. He set his groceries down, leaning the sack against his leg. He pushed back his hat and mopped a hand over his face.

"My name's Oldring," said the rancher. "I bought the Cunningham place about a month ago. That's west of here. My south boundary runs along Four Mile Creek for quite a ways."

Will Brubaker seemed to be aware of that. At least he made no comment.

"At three places along the creek," Oldring continued, "homesteads jut into my range. I want to buy those three homesteads. You own one of them."

"I don't own it yet," said Will. "I haven't proved up on it."

"Then I'll buy your patent and prove up on the land myself."

Will seemed to consider this for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Oldring. I've worked sort of hard on that land. I think I'd rather keep it."

Oldring's face hardened, and a driving impatience came into his voice. "But here's a chance to hold me up, man. Within reason, you can name your own price."

"No, I don't think so," said Will. "I don't believe in holding up a man, anyhow."

"I'm talking cash, Brubaker," said Oldring sharply. "Cash you could buy things with."

"A man on a homestead doesn't need much cash," said Will, smiling. "I raise my own seed, and most of my food. I have a good team, a saddle horse, some chickens and pigs, and a milk cow. Cash isn't awfully important to me."

"Then what is?"

"Why, whipping the land, Mr. Oldring. Growing things, and doing a little better this year than I did last."

"Every man has his price," said the rancher angrily.

WILL shrugged. "Yep, that's what I've heard. I never gave it much thought, though."

The muscles of Oldring's face were working. His cheeks were flushed. He cried, "Look here, man! I'm serious. I want my south line to follow the creek without any farms jutting into it. I'm offering to buy you out."

"I know you are," said Will, "but my place is fenced. Your cattle don't bother me, and my farm doesn't seem to bother them. After all, it's not a large farm. You've plenty of land without it."

"That's not the point," said Oldring. "What's your price?"

Will shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't name one. Sorry, Mr. Oldring."

He reached for his groceries, picked them up, turned away, and left Oldring staring after him, scowling and muttering under his breath.

"What's the matter with him, anyhow?" asked Oldring finally. "There's other land he could homestead. And he will!"

None of us made any comment. A shiver ran over my body. We hadn't had any trouble around here for a long time. I hoped Oldring wouldn't start any, but I hadn't liked what I had heard.

I glanced away from Oldring, looked across the street and saw a funny thing. Kathy Keeler had come out of Sue Bennett's dressmaking shop and had stopped to speak to Will Brubaker, and after a moment they walked off together, just as though they were close friends. Kathy and Will! It didn't make sense. Kathy could have her pick of any single man in the valley. It was crazy to think she might be interested in Will. I put the notion out of my mind.

By nightfall, I reckon everyone in town had heard of Oldring's intention to buy up the patents of the three homesteaders whose property lay on the north side of Four Mile Creek.

"It's a pretty decent way to treat homesteaders," said Gabe Wallace, who was one of the oldtimers in the valley. "In my day, we ran 'em out at the point of a gun."

Joe Endicott, who had a ranch in the north valley, had another point to emphasize. "It's not such a bad plan, even if Oldring has to pay out a lot for the patents," declared Joe. "Once he controls the entire north line of Four Mile Creek, he can do a lot to keep other homesteaders from settling along it. In that way he can hold the water for a drouth year when he may need it."

I suppose that was what Oldring had in mind. He didn't own all the range he controled, no rancher did. Land everywhere was open for settlement, but pretty generally settlement was limited to places where there was water,

like along Four Mile Creek. In a drough year, Oldring might need the water in the creek.

"What if the homesteaders won't sell?" I suggested.

"Won't sell?" Joe shouted. "Show me a homesteader anywhere who can stand up to a cattleman."

"It's been done," I said mildly.

Joe Endicott looked disgusted. He said, "Reb, you're getting old. You don't think straight any more."

I didn't argue the matter. Perhaps Joe Endicott was right. In the back of my mind I half hoped he was. I could remember the days Gabe Wallace had mentioned, the days when some pretty terrible things had been done to preserve this valley from homesteaders. They were with us now, of course, but times were changing.

"Tell me this," Joe continued. "Can you imagine that little guy we saw today facing up to Frank Oldring?"

I drew up a mental picture of Will Brubaker, who was just what Joe had called him —a little guy. And I pictured Frank Oldring, wide shouldered, twice as heavy. I remembered Oldring's worn gunbelt. I doubted if Will had ever carried a gun. Oldring was noisy, forceful, confident. In comparison, Will seemed almost timid. It was hard to figure Will Brubaker standing against the rancher.

Three days later, Art Delvin and Sam Hardesty passed through town with their families and their loaded wagons. They were on their way to Tiffany and points beyond, where they had heard there was good land open to settlement. Each had made a satisfactory deal with Frank Oldring.

"What about Will Brubaker?" I asked them.

"I don't know," said Delvin. "Will's a funny guy. He's stubborn—or maybe he's just holding out for more money."

"I think it's the girl," said Hardesty.

"He could take her with him, couldn't he?" said Delvin. "It seems to me that a wad of money might be a final clincher, so far as the girl is concerned."

"What girl?" I asked.

Neither man knew, but each was sure she lived somewhere to the south of Will's place on Four Mile Creek. They said he rode down to see her quite often. An old man can afford to be curious, and a man who has retired finds time hanging heavily on his hands. The Keelers lived south of Four Mile Creek, and the next day I rode that way. It was midmorning when I pulled up in the yard in front of the ranch house. Kathy came out on the porch as I dismounted. She was wearing a brightly patterned gingham dress, tight in the right places. I'm not too old to notice that.

"Howdy, Reb," she called. "What brings you this way?"

"A pretty girl," I answered. "But maybe I'm too late."

HER smile was gone in the twinkling of an eye. She stiffened and looked past me to the north. Her lips were suddenly tight, pulled so close together I could see only the line they made across her face.

"Something wrong?" I asked as I reached the porch.

Kathy nodded. "Yes, terribly wrong. But I don't see how you guessed it."

"Will?" I suggested.

Again she nodded. She twisted her hands together, still looking past me.

"A quarrel?" I asked.

"I suppose you could call it a quarrel," said Kathy. "Reb, he's the most stubborn man in the world." She started blinking her eyes, blinking away a flow of tears.

I said, "Tell me about it."

She wanted to talk, that was obvious enough. In a moment it all came out, about the offer Oldring had made for Will Brubaker's patent and about how Will had refused, even in the face of the threats Oldring had made.

"It's all my fault," Kathy wailed. "I once told Will I loved his homestead, that I could live there forever. That's why he won't sell. When I deny it now, he won't believe me. He's going to defy Oldring. If anything happens to him—"

Her voice choked up and she couldn't finish what she had been saying. Her mother came out on the porch. Ella Keeler was usually a cheerful-looking woman, but she didn't seem cheerful this morning. She glanced at Kathy, then at me.

"What have you been saying to her, Reb?" she demanded.

"Why, I was just about to say that things are never as black as they're painted," I answered.

"Some things are," said Ella Keeler. "And it's well that they are. Come inside, Reb. The coffee's still on the stove."

I went inside and had coffee with Ella. A little while later, Dan Keeler joined us. What happened to Kathy, I don't know. But, without her there, both Dan and Ella were ready to talk about their daughter and Will Brubaker. Will had been riding down to see her off and on for a month now. At first Dan and Ella had been a little amused at his visits, sure that Kathy would never grow interested in him. But suddenly she had.

"There's no accounting for a woman's taste," growled Dan Keeler. "Kathy could do a lot better for herself. I'll admit that when you get to know him, Will's not so bad. But a man likes to see his daughter pick someone safe."

"What about this trouble with Oldring?" I asked.

Dan shrugged. "When you come right down to it, what else can Will do but sell out? You shouldn't have to ask me a question like that, Reb."

I had my noonday meal with the Keelers, and in the afternoon rode north. It was maybe two-thirty by the time I reached Will Brubaker's. He had a nice place, all right, and it was understandable that he wouldn't want to give it up. The south line of his homestead was in a curving bend of Four Mile Creek, and in the corner of the bend was a thick grove of spruce.

He had built his cabin and barn in the shelter and protection of these trees. He had a couple of sheds, and I could see the mound of his root cellar. To the north and east were his fields, mostly in corn, just topping. A vegetable garden was close to the house. Tied to a hitching post near his front door was a saddled horse—Kathy's, I was sure.

I was right. As I pulled up and dismounted, Kathy and Will came outside and stood watching me. The girl's face was flushed, and she looked angry. Will was scowling. They didn't look a bit like two people in love.

"Howdy, folks," I said. "Thought I'd just drop by for a minute."

"You guessed I would be here," cried Kathy. "I don't care what you think about it, either."

I chuckled at that. I said. "Kathy, you remind me of Ellen, my wife. She's been dead a long time now, but once, before we were married, she came riding out to my place to warn me against a man who had sworn to kill me, and who was waiting for me in town. Folks who heard about it didn't hold it against her."

"What happened?" asked Kathy.

What had happened was very simple. I had gone into town in spite of Ellen's advice. I had met the man and had shot him. But this wasn't the place to tell such a story. Will Brubaker hadn't been reared in the same school. He hadn't had to live by his gun. He was a homesteader, a man who worked the soil. I ducked Kathy's question, said hello to Will, and told him his corn looked fine.

"It's going to pay off this year," said Will, and there was a quiet pride in his voice. "By next year I'll really be getting ahead."

"By next year you'll be dead, if you stay here," cried Kathy. "There are other places a man can farm. Tell him, Reb. Tell him there are."

"Kathy's right," I said.

"But I like it here," said Will. "You both think I should be afraid of Mr. Oldring. In the last analysis, if I refuse to sell, what can he do?"

"He can cut your fence," I said bluntly. "He can drive his cattle across your fields, ruining your crop. He can burn your house down. If that doesn't work, he can kill you."

WILL frowned. He shook his head. "I don't think it'll go that far," he said slowly. "I'm not really in Oldring's way. There are laws against the kinds of things you're talking about."

"The law doesn't bring a dead man back to life," I answered. "A fire can be made to look accidental. So could a stampede of cattle across your fields. Or the creek could be accidentally diverted to flood your land."

The scowl on Will's face grew deeper. Suddenly he looked up and beyond me, and I heard the sound of horses. I glanced around and saw several riders approaching the house. One was Oldring.

Kathy stepped inside. She came out with a rifle, but Will shook his head. "We won't need it, Kathy," he said under his breath. "Put it back."

"I'll not put it back," said Kathy.

Will shrugged. He looked at me and grinned, and then waited for Oldring and his men to pull up.

They did. They stared at us, particularly at me and Kathy. Oldring's first question was directed at me. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

It's funny, but I was suddenly aware of a lifting anger, and of a wish that I could have been in Will's shoes for a few minutes. This was like the old days. I've said I hated trouble, and I do, but there's no use denying that those old days had their high moments.

"Well?" snapped Oldring.

"Is there any law you know of against a man's visiting a friend?" I asked bluntly.

Oldring seemed to consider this for a moment, his face showing a heavy and ugly scowl. Then he apparently decided to make the best of our presence. He looked at Will and said bleakly, "I'll give you five hundred dollars more than I said I'd pay you the other day. It's my final offer."

"Take it, Will," said Kathy instantly.

"No," said Will. "My place is not for sale."

His words ssemed to hit Oldring with all the force of a blow. A deep flush of color showed in the rancher's face. He sucked in a quick, sharp breath, and his hand slid back to rest on his holstered gun. I believe if Kathy and I hadn't been there, he might have drawn it. He started to, then changed his mind and leaned forward.

"It's my last offer, Brubaker," he shouted. "Do you understand that? I've made my last offer."

"Certainly I understand it," said Will, "but I'm not interested."

"You have until Saturday night to accept."

Will shook his head. "I'll not change my mind, Mr. Oldring."

"Until Saturday night," said Oldring again. "After that, I'll not be responsible for what happens to you. I hired a man the other day. He says he knows you, that he's sworn to kill you. I don't know why, but I've kept him away from here. I won't keep him away after Saturday. I've had another man keeping my cattle away from your fence, but I can't afford to pay someone just for that. After Saturday, if my cattle break through the weak fence you've put up, they'll break through, and there's nothing I can do about it. Think it over, Brubaker. I've made more than a fair offer for your land. You'd be wise to take it."

Will looked a little pale around the mouth. He made no answer, but then Oldring and his men didn't wait for an answer. They wheeled around and rode away.

For a while, then, the three of us were silent. I kept watching Will. He shuddered, and ran his fingers through his hair. It was black and shaggy and needed trimming. The moisture of perspiration was on his forehead. I knew what Will was thinking. At least, I thought I knew what he was thinking. Kathy was watching him, too, and Kathy looked tragic. She had set the rifle back inside the house.

"I don't know of any man who hates me," said Will finally. "That is, I don't konw of anyone who hates me enough to want to kill me."

"There is no such man," I answered. "But if you were found shot to death some morning, such a story would do."

"And my fence is strong," said Will.

"Any fence can be weakened."

Will bit his lips. He turned toward the door and went inside the house.

"I'll talk to him," said Kathy under her breath. "He'll sell, Reb. What else can he do?"

What else *could* he do? Nothing else. I mounted my horse and headed back toward town, feeling a little sick at the stomach.

THE sheriff was an old friend of mine. I talked to him, and he went out and talked to Oldring. They must have had a stormy session. The sheriff was still fuming when he got back to town. Oldring had stuck to his story that he had hired an enemy of Will's, who meant to kill him. He said he had later fired him, but wasn't sure he had left the country. He gave the man a name, Ed Wingate. No one, so far as I know, had ever heard of Wingate. Oldring had also insisted that he would eventually buy Brubaker's land. He had resented the sheriff's interference.

"What do I do now?" asked the sheriff. "I don't think there is such a man as Wingate, but if we find Will Brubaker dead some morning, that's the story I'll be bucking. I can suspect Oldring of the murder, but suspecting a man and proving him guilty are two different things."

"It won't come to that," I said slowly.

"You think Brubaker will sell?"

"What would you do?"

"I'd go after Oldring with a gun," said the sheriff. "But of course I'm not Brubaker. I suppose he'll sell, at that."

Saturday came, Saturday morning and then Saturday afternoon. Late in the afternoon, a little after four, Will Brubaker came riding into town. I waved to him as he rode past the hotel porch where I was sitting. I watched him rein up in front of the Emporium, where he tied his horse. Earlier, I had seen Oldring ride into town. I hadn't waved to Oldring. Oldring hadn't waved to me.

Will went into the Emporium, then came out with a package under his arm. He stopped a boy on the street, talked to him for a few minutes, then came over toward the hotel. The boy scurried toward the Toltec Saloon.

"Mind if I sit here for a few minutes, Mr. Tannenbaum?" asked Will as he climbed the porch steps.

"Call me Reb," I answered. "Everyone does. And have a chair. Have you made your deal yet with Oldring?"

Will sat down. He shook his head. "Of course not. Didn't you hear me tell him my place wasn't for sale?"

I frowned, feeling suddenly a little uneasy. I glanced down the street toward the Toltec Saloon. Oldring was there, had been there for an hour or so. He had probably had several drinks by this time. Pretty soon now he would hear that Will Brubaker was in town, and he would remember that this was Saturday.

"What are you going to do?" I asked abruptly.

"What am I going to do?" said Will. "Why, I'm going to go on farming." He paused for a moment. Then he said, "Reb, I don't suppose I rate very high in the valley. This is cattle country, and I'm a farmer. I'm not rich, and I don't have much land. Frank Oldring's a cattleman. He has money to burn, and a hundred acres for every acre of mine. But because he's important and I'm not, does it mean I have to run from him? Because he's big, does it give him the right to crack the whip?"

I shook my head.

"My mother was a schoolteacher before she married my father," Will continued. "She was a smart woman. All the learning I have, I got from her. One thing she told me was that in this country all men were equal, and that one has the same rights as another. That's a thought to hang on to."

He was unwrapping the package he had carried from the Emporium. It wasn't a large package. When he got the paper open I stared wide eyed at what it held—a sixgun and a box of cartridges.

"What are you going to do with that?" I gasped.

"Use it, maybe," said Will, looking at me.

He lifted the gun, balanced it in his hand, then broke it open and started loading it. I stared quickly toward the saloon, but saw nothing unusual. I remembered the boy Will had stopped on the street. The boy had hurried to the saloon.

"That boy you stopped," I said swiftly. "What did you tell him? What did you have him do?"

"Why, I asked the boy if he knew Frank Oldring, and he said he did. Then I asked him if he knew where Oldring was, and he said at the Toltec Saloon. I gave him half a dollar, and told him to find Oldring and give him a message."

"A message!" I shouted. "What message?"

"I told him to tell Oldring that if he was still in town at five o'clock, I meant to come after him and kill him."

I couldn't believe what I had heard. I stared at Will Brubaker, the shock of his words still bouncing through my mind.

"Maybe you think it was wrong of me to do a thing like that," said Will.

"Wrong?" I cried. "Man, do you know how Oldring will take that message?"

"I don't imagine he'll like it," said Will. "But then, he threatened me in the same way. You heard him. He told me of some man who meant to kill me. There is no such man. He was referring to himself. And if Oldring can threaten me, I can threaten him. That's what

I meant by one man's having the same rights as another."

I was still staring at him wide eyed, dazed. He hadn't once lifted his voice. He didn't seem at all excited. He rested easily in his chair on the hotel porch, holding the gun across his lap. He was a little guy, tired looking, right in everything he had said, but wrong, too. He wasn't the equal of Frank Oldring, even with a gun in his hand. Oldring knew guns, Will didn't.

I leaned toward him and said, "Listen to me, Will. Give me that gun."

BUT Will wasn't listening. He was staring past me, down the street toward the Toltec Saloon. I took a quick look over my shoulder and saw that Frank Oldring had come out. I saw Oldring draw his gun, examine it, then drop it back in its holster. I saw him start up the street toward us. Maybe he had seen Will sitting next to me. Or maybe someone had told him where the homesteader was.

"Will," I said. "Listen."

"It looks as though Oldring isn't going to wait until five, doesn't it?" said Will.

He moistened his lips. His frown was a little deeper. I saw him glance up at the sky, as though maybe for a last look at it.

"Maybe you'd better walk on up the street, Reb," Will suggested. "This is my problem, you know. It'll be good to get things settled."

He still didn't sound excited. I glanced at Oldring, who was halfway here. I thought of the sheriff, but the sheriff's office was at the other end of town. There were a few men on the street, but none close. I knew I ought to do something, but I didn't. I just sat there.

Oldring reached the hotel. He climbed the steps and turned to face Will Brubaker. I don't think he even noticed I was there.

"You, Brubaker!" he shouted. "Did you send that kid to see me?"

"I sent him," said Will. "You still have time to get out of town. It's not yet five."

Anger was almost choking Frank Oldring. I could see its color in his throat. He was breathing heavily. Here was a defiance he couldn't take; everything in him rebeled against it. He saw the gun in Will's lap, and needed to see nothing more.

"So you've bought a gun, have you?" he roared. "Well, use it."

His hand swept down to his holster, then came up. I heard the roar of a gun. But it wasn't Oldring's gun which had been fired, it was Will's. He tilted it up, squeezed the trigger, then lowered it again. He had needed only that one shot.

The sheriff paced back and forth across his office. He was scowling.

I said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"What *can* I do about it?" asked the sheriff. "You make it sound like self-defense. You say that Oldring went for his gun first. But how could he, if Will's gun was lying across his lap?"

"Will's not a gunman," I pointed out. "He didn't have a holster to carry his gun. It was across his lap. His hand was on it, but he hadn't lifted it or made any threatening motion with it."

"What about the message he sent Oldring, the threat to kill him?"

"Oldring had made the same threat, in a roundabout way," I pointed out. "As Will says, what's right for one man is right for another. Besides, it was Oldring who came roaring up the street after Will. All Will was doing at the time was sitting on the hotel porch, talking to me."

The sheriff nodded. His scowl seemed to be going away. "Where's Will now?" he asked.

"On his way to see Kathy Keeler."

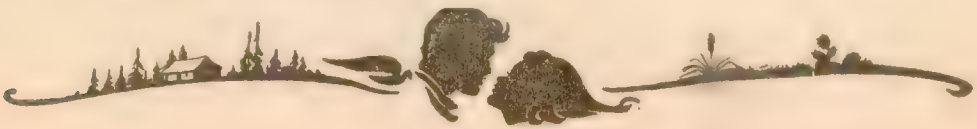
"You mean that Will and Kathy—"

"That's what I mean, Sheriff."

"Well, what do you know," said the sheriff. "How come Kathy would pick a little guy like Will Brubaker?"

"A little guy, Sheriff?" I asked, grinning.

"Well, maybe he's not such a little guy, at that," said the sheriff. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."



The LAST RIDE

By SALLY TYREE SMITH

THE HATE HE FELT for Waldron had grown with the years . . . till there was nothing Max wouldn't sacrifice, to hurt his enemy

I'M home, he murmured aloud as if he wanted to convince himself. It seemed to Max Morley now that he had known from the beginning he would have to stop running. A man can only run so far. He no longer felt young, and he was tired. It even showed in his walk. There was no grace in his movements. His long step was light enough, but oddly stilted. The saddle he pitched on the juniper post had been his home.

The yard was familiar and yet distantly strange, like a half-forgotten dream. It had been ten years since he had walked up on this porch. How many times had he dreamed of doing just this! And now his father was dead, and with him a part of that dream. You can't tell a dead man

you're sorry, or that you're through with drifting. There is no real beginning again.

His step on the porch brought a man across the front of the house to peer through the screen door. The man stared motionless, disbelieving. before he jerked open the door and walked out.

"Max—Max Morley," he finally said.

"Ed Gorman," Max answered, without a trace of a smile.

They stood there staring at each other. The craziest of thoughts went through Max's mind—this man helping him on his first pony, teaching him to shoot his first gun. The memories were all dead now. But Gorman was the same slate-colored man, with his gray hair and pale eyes, with the habitual dead cigarette dangling loosely from his mouth.

Without speaking, they sat down on the top step. This, too, was part of a forgotten ritual. Max had always come to this man.

"Where did my letter catch up with you?" Gorman asked briefly.

"El Paso." Max told him.

Gorman nodded, as if this explained away ten years.

"I'm glad you're home," he said, and hurried on as if to conceal any sentimentality. "Pine outfit needs you."

"Me?" Max asked flatly, his eyes hard. "A man always running away, a drifter?"

Gorman looked at him steadily. "I never said that, and I never thought it. I don't believe in speaking wrong of the dead, but your father was a pious stubborn fool until the day he died. There's not a man on this ranch who thinks you failed him."

It was a long speech for this man. Max knew by Gorman's words that his father had never forgiven him for running away. And he was tired of his futile memories.

"Is there trouble in the valley?" he asked.

"Tularosa Valley has changed," Gorman hedged, without giving any details.

There was no use pressing him for more. He believed in a man's making his own mistakes, finding his own answers. The letter Max had received in El Paso had told him his father was dead, and nothing more.

The sound of the supper triangle stirred the yard. Max watched the crew pile out of the bunkhouse, and knew that Gorman's shrewd eyes were fixed on him.

"Come and meet your crew," Gorman said.

If there was a silent challenge in his words, Max had to meet it. He followed Gorman in. The men watched him openly, silently. He remembered a few of the old hands, Andy Groom, Joe Tindell, and Beech Virterees. Ed Gorman pointed a long bony finger at the remainder of the crew and named them. They nodded, briefly, curiously alert.

Max deliberately sat down on the long bench, leaving the head chair for Gorman. Something in this simple act released the silence, and the crew began talking of the fall round-up.

Gorman included him casually. "We have the army contract to meet this month."

Max nodded without speaking. This was a part of the life he remembered, but it was no longer familiar and good to him. He felt like a stranger as the talk went on around him.

Later that night, he sat with Gorman in the lamplighted living room. He picked up the sound of galloping horses almost the same instant that Gorman stood up. And he noticed the old man automatically check the gunbelt around his slack waist. Times had changed in Tularosa!

They stepped out on the porch together and moved away from the light streaming through the screen door. The riders pulled up in the yard. It was a moment before Max could understand their strange position. Then it came to him without shock that one of them was trying to hold the other in his saddle.

"Ed! Ed Gorman!" It was a girl's voice carrying over the yard, with a clear desperate sound.

Gorman was already sprinting down through the yard with long steps, and Max followed him.

"Christine Rhodes! What's happened?" Gorman was shaken from his usual calm.

"It's Val. He's been shot!" she cried.

GORMAN shouted for Joe Tindell, and half lifted Val down from his saddle. Tindell appeared like a swift shadow to help him. Max moved around to the girl. He

put up his big hands and swung her down. For a brief disconcerting moment he was aware of the slim weight of her body, before he removed his hands and stepped back.

Gorman and Joe Tindell got the wounded Val into the house and propped him in a chair. Gorman tore away his blood-matted shirt sleeve to examine the dark purplish hole in the slim arm. The girl gasped as she watched.

"It's not bad, Tina. He'll be all right," Gorman told her swiftly.

She clutched Gorman's arm suddenly. Her wide eyes were fixed on his face. "That's not all of it, Ed. They caught Val on the old Indian Trail tonight, and they're after him now!"

"*Who* caught him?" Gorman asked.

"Burr Waldron. I think Sheriff Olan is riding with him." She paused, and her next words were low and reluctant. "I'll understand if you refuse me now—but will you help us?"

Gorman's pale eyes shifted and met Max's hard stare. They were thinking the same thing. Burr Waldron—the name sang through Max with the same old hate. And Gorman knew it.

Gorman jerked his head toward Max. "The owner of Pine Point is home now. You'll have to ask him, Tina."

She had a quick restless way of moving. Max watched her step toward him and stop abruptly. He knew his entire crew was crowding through the screen door, aware of the picture she made standing there—aware of the soft tawny hair on her shoulders, of her pale pretty face and the disturbing femininity of her body in her riding clothes. She looked shamed now, and a certain pride held her silent. Only her dark eyes pleaded with Max to help. He looked down at Val and realized he was her brother, and he was just a kid.

"How many men are after him?" Max asked quietly.

His crew seemed to hold their breaths while they listened, it was that quiet. What did they expect of him, he wondered.

"I don't know. More than a dozen." She tried to control her shaking voice.

He knew what he was going to do, just as he had always known that a day of reckoning would come with Burr Waldron. He knew he had come home to face it.

He swung to his men standing in the door, and wondered fleetingly if they would take his orders. "Spread out in the yard and be ready for trouble. Don't start anything unless they do!" He felt a queer satisfaction when the men scrambled away from the door. He turned to Gorman. "We'd better tell the same story for the sake of Sheriff Olan. I hired Val to work at Pine Point today, and he hasn't been off the place tonight. Someone get him a clean shirt, and a drink."

Gorman refused to meet Max's glance, as if he didn't want to know what was in his mind. It was only a few minutes before Tindell ran in with a clean shirt. Gorman had bandaged Val's arm while the boy finished his drink. Val was deathly pale except for a little false color the drink had brought to his face.

"Can you go through with it?" Max asked him doubtfully.

"Yes, sir," the boy said, clamping his teeth together.

He was about fifteen years old, with a shy frightened look about him. Tina moved toward Max.

"You won't be sorry," she began in a whisper.

"Don't thank me," Max said shortly, and turned away from the rebuffed puzzled look on her face.

He walked out on the porch and Gorman followed him. They stood there for a long moment before Gorman spoke, in his cautious way.

"You just might be sorry, Max," he said softly. He jerked his gray head toward the girl and her brother. "That's Tina and Val Rhodes in there. They live with the nesters around Prairie Dog. It's kind of a wild bunch. A man called Draper runs the lot of them. There's been a lot of rustling going on in the valley, and no one has proved that kid Val doesn't have a hand in it."

Max stared at him without speaking. His mind barely grasped the meaning of the words. Burr Waldron—his mind seemed to echo the name. Suddenly Gorman's shrewd glance grew suspicious.

"You're not doing this for that kid, Val," Gorman stated bluntly. "It's Burr Waldron,

isn't it? The same old quarrel. It's always been that way, even before the day he married Cecily Wheeler."

IT WAS funny, Max reflected grimly: Gorman was the only man in the world who could say this to him. The sound of horses coming up the road seemed to vibrate omniously the length of the valley. It brought every man scattered around the yard to instant attention.

"Get Val out here on the porch," Max told Gorman, "and tell the girl to stay in the house."

As he waited for this meeting, Max kept thinking of Sheriff Olan. He didn't want to have to run again.

Burr Waldron rode a little ahead of his crowd. He hadn't changed much in ten years, but now he wore a sober mature look that was somehow unbecoming for his thirty years. His thick dark hair was cut close to his round head and his black moustache was neatly trimmed.

Waldron waited until his men rode up in the yard before he spoke. His first words proved he hadn't noticed Max or Val Rhodes at the end of the dark porch.

"We tracked that Rhodes kid to your place, Gorman," Burr said heavily. His dignified tone made everything he said assume solid importance.

"Why?" Gorman asked blandly.

"Hell, you know why!" Waldron had changed instantly. The hard-suppressed violence in his words alerted every man in the yard, and turned them uneasily and silent. "We've been trying for weeks to chase down some of the Prairie Dog bunch, Draper's crowd. They rode on Clyde's range tonight, and we chased them to Indian Trail and lost them. We picked up the kid's tracks and followed him here."

Max noticed that Clyde never spoke. He remembered him as a shiftless two-bit rancher who had been known to throw a long rope. He's gone respectable now, Max thought sardonically.

"Who appointed you the vigilante committee of Tularoosa?" Gorman asked, and then went on. "And how do you know the kid had a part in what happened tonight?"

Waldron stared down at him with dislike. He didn't enjoy having any man question his motives. Sheriff Olan moved in.

Max's attention quickened. The night had turned cool, but the sheriff wore only a vest over his flannel shirt. His tin star picked up the moonlight. There was a curious look of defeat, mingling with a kind of stubborn resentment, on his face. Max knew the man couldn't forget the little tin star he wore, but he was somehow afraid of Waldron.

"Wait a minute, Waldron," Olan said, his tone deferential, not commanding. He turned on Gorman. "This rustling concerns Pine as much as it does any outfit in the valley, Gorman. And you know as well as any man around here that Val Rhodes has been running wild in the hills."

"I know that the kid wanted to get work on some of the ranches, and no one had nerve enough to take him on," Gorman said quietly.

"I did." Max Morley stepped forward into the light.

Olan squinted down at him, his expression suddenly curious. "I didn't know you'd come home, Morley."

Waldron ignored any amenities. On his face was the same look he'd worn ten years ago when he fought Max until they had almost killed each other. He would always carry that scar beside his eye to remind him of it.

"You hired him?" Waldron said.

"That's right. I need an extra man for the next month or so," Max said in his softest voice. "He rode in here this afternoon and hasn't been off the place tonight."

Max felt a reluctant admiration for the kid Val in this moment. Val stepped up beside him and didn't move. You couldn't have told from his slight swagger that his arm was probably giving him hell right now.

"I don't believe it," Waldron said flatly.

Tense silence fell over the yard. The men here who remembered Max Morley from the past knew he wouldn't take this. And Burr Waldron never backed down for any man.

"I've waited a long time, Burr. If you want to finish our fight now, I'm ready," Max said, each freckle standing out plainly on his pale face.

Waldron studied him with hard speculation. Whispered stories had drifted back to Tula-

His eyes were anxious as her body trembled uncontrollably with her hysterical outburst

rosa about Max Morley. But this wouldn't have stopped Waldron now if fighting had suited his plans.

"Not yet," Waldron said. The way he said it wasn't conciliatory. He didn't mean it to be.

Max moved so fast that few of the men in the yard actually followed his action. The next moment he was standing there facing Waldron with his gun in his hand. The trigger had been removed from the colt and the hammer ground smooth so it would slip easily from under the pressure of his thumb for a deadly shot. It was the trick of a man who had to shoot fast—or a gunfighter.

"Can you beat me?" Max asked him, his eyes blazing hate.

"I can try," Waldron said slowly, his dark face flushed. His next words were deliberately aimed to hurt. "I have more to live for than you, Morley."

MAX felt the hot blood in his face. The colt trembled slightly in his hand. He wanted to kill him, now. There was nothing in the world but his hate.

Sheriff Olan crowded his horse roughly between Waldron's animal and the porch. Waldron yanked viciously on the reins to keep his horse from bolting.

"What the hell?" he bellowed angrily.

Olan glared back at him. "Don't forget I'm still sheriff here, Burr."

"All right. Tell him, too," Waldron said heatedly.

Olan turned slowly to Max. "You rode away from a fight ten years ago, Morley. Are you coming home to start another one?"

"Maybe he expected us to kill the fatted calf," Waldron taunted.

Max shoved his gun back in his holster. His hard control had slipped for only a moment. Beneath his shame for the violent display of temper was a sudden thought—make Waldron wait, knowing every minute of the day that you're going to kill him!

"Keep out of my way, Waldron," he said slowly.

"Things have changed in the valley," Waldron said bluntly. "Pine outfit doesn't give orders any more."

"You'll have to prove that to me."

"I'll do that, Morley," Burr promised. "And don't get proud about tonight. The fun is only beginning."

"I'll be around to enjoy it," Max said.

Olan eyed him grimly. "If I find proof that Val is mixed up with Draper's bunch, I'll be back. Or if you start anything, I'll run you out of this valley again, Max."

He meant it. He was being crowded into some kind of action. Even if this was a grandstand play for Waldron's crowd, he still meant it.

"And I want you to understand this," Max said carefully. "I don't aim to turn tail and run again."

"You're a hotheaded fighter and you won't be able to keep out of trouble," Olan said. Then he lifted his reins and rode out.

A moment later Tina Rhodes stepped out on the porch. Max was watching Waldron and saw his eyes sweep over the girl with a narrowed, speculative look. Then he glanced briefly at Max with hard amusement.

Max felt himself tense as he waited. He wanted to say something to force this thing now, but suddenly Waldron wheeled his horse and followed Olan. No one moved in the yard until the last sound of hoofs echoed and faded down the valley road.

Val sat down abruptly on the chair. His head drooped and his slim body trembled with the effort this scene had cost him.

Max bent over him. "Are you all right, kid?"

Val didn't answer that. Instead, he looked straight at Max. "I won't forget what you've done for me tonight," the boy murmured. Then he fainted.

"Val!" Tina cried out.

"He'll do," Max said, and meant it both ways.

He didn't notice the girl glance up swiftly as he lifted Val and carried him into the house. Tina and Ed Gorman followed him into the bedroom. Gorman bent over Val to remove his boots. Tina wiped his damp face with a towel. Finally Val opened tired, drowsy eyes.

"Get some sleep, boy," Gorman said gruffly.

Max moved toward the door. He was crossing the front room when he heard the girl's light step behind him.

"Wait, please," she said. There was no

friendliness on her pretty face now. "I think I know what you meant when you told me not to thank you. You weren't helping Val or me tonight. Your quarrel with Waldron goes back a long time, doesn't it?"

Max felt color rise in his face. Everything she said was true. It had been a long time since he had given much thought to any man except Waldron. The hate for him seemed to dwarf all other feeling. But, perversely, he resented this girl's putting it into words.

"I meant it when I said Val was working here," he defended himself indirectly. He saw the instant protest on her face and added, "Olan will be back if he leaves here."

"You have a reason for everything you do, don't you?" she asked with quiet scorn.

Her words stung him. "Most men do," he answered.

She shook her head. "Not for the same reason you do."

"What's that?"

"I think it's hate," she said quietly, watching him with an expression he didn't understand. "Your hate for Waldron. And you don't hate him for the same reason the people around Prairie Dog do. Don't think all the people who live in the hills are no-good, and run with Draper's crowd! There are some decent families there, trying to make an honest living. But Waldron won't let us alone; he wants to drive us all out. He use to summer graze his stock in the hills, and he hates every one of us for settling there!"

She didn't wait for his answer. He stared after her slim figure until she had closed Val's bedroom door. There was something akin to dislike on his rugged face. The beginning of her speech had touched him, and he didn't like it. Was he different from any other man? Why had hate ridden him for over a thousand miles, and haunted him more than ten years? Was it only because of Cecily?

DURING the next week a sharpened sense of hurry and expectation seemed to stimulate the entire crew at Pine Point. Max felt it too. It was as if they waited for Burr Waldron to make the next move.

Max had never known a kid like Val. The next day he wanted to ride out with the crew, and moved restlessly through the house when Gorman told him to keep quiet for a few days. He insisted he was strong enough to ride herd to the army post. He was obviously eager to please Max, to prove himself to the entire outfit. He acted as if no man had ever sided him before.

Gorman told Max a little more of the trouble in Tularosa, that next morning. "Waldron wasn't just talking, last night, when he said the fun was only beginning, Max. The day your father died, that sober son tried to get the army contract for beef. When I heard about it I rode over and talked to Major Hilmar. He said that as long as our beef continued to meet the requirements, the contract was ours. But I got a feeling the Major had listened to Waldron. Word is going around that Pine Point is dead—along with the old man."

Max held his temper down. "Do you think Waldron will try to stop us from meeting the contract?"

"I didn't say that. But something is gnawing at Waldron. Ever since he could straddle a horse he's been running his 66 Ranch. That's his whole life. He thinks every nester in the hills is a personal threat to 66."

Suddenly Max was thinking of Cecily. Hadn't that been what she wanted, an empire in Tularosa? He knew she had been afraid of his own fiddlefoot ways. It seemed to him now that nothing had changed; there was the same old hate between him and Waldron, and there would be until one of them was dead.

He only saw Tina Rhodes briefly during these busy days. He knew she rode over to see Val, but she usually left before he rode in. He had a vague uneasy feeling about his meetings with this girl that irritated him. And the next time he talked to her she found him with Cecily Waldron!

It was the night before the trail drive, and he rode in after dark. Gorman was prowling around the yard waiting for him. Gorman's low hurried words barely reached him.

"She's here. She wants to talk to you down by the pines."

Max didn't question; he knew who it was.

"For heaven's sake," Gorman muttered, "be careful."

Max strode away from him. He heard the disapproval in Gorman's voice; but he didn't care. He was only aware of the secret excitement running through him.

Cecily Waldron was sitting on a pine stump waiting for him. She stood up quickly. For a moment only her slim shadow was outlined. He walked up and stood looking down at her. She was the same dark-haired girl he had taken to his first dance—the same girl who had been his first love.

"Aren't you going to speak to me, Max?" she asked, half laughing. That was like her. Her ebullient spirit made her a person of quick-changing moods of laughter and anger.

"You shouldn't have come, Cecily."

"I know," she murmured.

Silence built up a memory between them, of their old quick quarrels, followed by the near violence of their passion when making up. Even now the memory was enough to stir him.

"You'd better ride home," he repeated.

She moved toward him then with a swift little cry, gripping the front of his shirt with her hands. "Not before I tell you I made a mistake ten years ago, Max. Everything went wrong for me from the beginning."

Her words jolted him and, without thinking clearly, his arms went around her. She was trembling as she pulled him down on the ground with her. Sensation broke through him, and it was the same as he remembered. Or was the thought of taking something from Waldron with him even now?

In this moment he heard the light step behind him. He stood up as he whirled around, his hand automatically slipping down to his colt before he recognized Tina Rhodes. She was close enough for him to see the shock on her young face before she turned and ran.

"Another girl?" Cecily asked swiftly.

Max shook his head, his eyes following the fleeing girl. "That's Tina Rhodes. Her brother works here."

"Val Rhodes?" Cecily asked, then shrugged, seeming to dismiss her from her mind. "I wanted to tell you to watch out for Burr. Is that wrong of me, Max?"

"Don't say any more." he felt a queer distaste for her warning. "You made your choice ten years ago, Cecily."

He watched her walk stiffly toward her horse and mount. It was too dark to see the expression on her face, but he heard the pride and hurt in her voice.

"That doesn't help me now," she said, and rode off.

WHEN he turned back toward the house, he was thinking of the look on Tina's face. He was angry with his own feeling of guilt. He didn't have to explain anything to her, he told himself.

Tina was moving restlessly around the yard, waiting for him. She glanced quickly at his face and then averted her eyes.

"Is Val riding with you tomorrow?" she asked coolly, ignoring the previous scene.

Max nodded, and watched her face. She seemed to want to say more, and yet she apparently hated to ask anything of him. Her dislike was plain on her face.

"I'll take care of him," Max told her.

She lifted her chin quickly. "I want to tell you something."

"You don't have to tell me anything."

"I want to." Her voice was husky and shook a little as she went on. "For a while Val was running wild in the hills. Draper used to come by our house at night to get him. Draper's a sly man, and smart in a evil way. I don't know what he'll do when he hears Val is working for you. But I wanted you to know that Val wasn't with him the night he got shot."

"Don't worry about Val, Tina," Max said quietly. He wondered how much she really knew of what went on in the hills.

"No one has ever tried to help Val before," she said, searching his face.

She started for her horse and he stepped in front of her. He was dissatisfied with this meeting, with her thoughts about him and Cecily. She gave him a startled look, and his freckled face felt warm as he tried to explain.

"I knew Cecily a long time before she was married," he said, feeling like a damn fool.

"But she *is* married," Tina said bluntly. "She has a home and a man. What does she want of you?"

"Nothing," he said stiffly. "She only rode over as a friend."

"Of course," Tina said, too sweetly, her smile malicious. He wanted to shake her.

"That's why she kissed you. She's so friendly she's liable to get you killed!"

He knew she had not intended to say this much. He was contrarily pleased in his own embarrassment to see the hot color on her face, and the way she bit her lip.

"Why do you care?" he drawled.

"I don't care!" she exploded. "I didn't ask you to explain anything to me!"

She turned and ran for her horse. He didn't understand his own feeling of wanting to go after her and make her listen. To what? he asked himself.

THEY followed the old Indian Trail through the red hills, the first day of the drive. It was a long, dusty day of breaking the cattle into driving and keeping them from turning toward home pasture at every step. Max intended to put about thirty miles between the wayward steers and home the first day.

During the day, Max found himself constantly aware of Val's whereabouts. He knew he was thinking of Tina's warning about the man Draper. Somehow he didn't think trouble would come from Draper. He kept thinking of Waldron, and of the old hate between them smoldering again.

It was some time before they bedded down the herd, that first night. And it was a tired crew that ate around the fire in camp. Without explanation, Max put extra men on night watch, and was aware of Gorman's steady regard.

Afterward Gorman stretched out with his head on his saddle, his cigarette pasted between his thin lips. Max sat down beside him.

"You don't expect trouble?" Max asked curiously.

"There'll be trouble," Gorman said drily. Then he turned over and slept.

It happened on the third night. A light rain started in the late afternoon, and it was a dark, dismal night. The herd was unusually restless, and kept milling around despite the riders' constant circling and low murmuring to calm them down.

Max had not been out of his saddle since daylight when he stepped down in camp for coffee. Automatically he checked his men, until he saw Val talking with Gorman. He was becoming a good nursemaid, he told himself with a wry grin. Because of a girl who hated him!

Rain rolled down off his hat brim to spatter in the fire, as he warmed his hands. For the first time since daylight he relaxed with no premonition of trouble. In this moment the sound of the gunshot blasted the camp.

With that startling sound, he heard his cattle stand up as one single body and begin to run. He thought at first that one of his own men had been careless, until the second shot hit the fire, scattering wild sparks in every direction. He started for his horse and fell on his face when a rapid volley of shots hit the camp. He cursed once as he reached for his gun.

Now the shots came from every direction, and he figured there must be at least a dozen riders circling the camp. He fired at the flash of gunfire, with a futile anger burning his face. He doubted if any of his wild shots hit home. He wondered what had happened to his men who were riding herd. He thought he heard firing in the distance, but he couldn't tell in this hellish den. His crew ought to be moving up.

Suddenly he swiveled his head, as he remembered Val. The kid was running around the camp recklessly, his nerves pitched to meet this fight. His whole face was lighted with excitement.

"Val, get down!" Max shouted in cold fear. The kid was going to get himself killed!

Val swung around with his gun in his hand and threw himself down beside Max. "That's Draper. Did you see him?" He was aiming his gun at a slim shadowy rider close to camp. "He looks like a fox, doesn't he?"

"And he's going to chew your head off if you don't keep it down!" Max shouted irritably.

Val only laughed at him as he threw his shot in the darkness. And he said something that Max remembered long after the fight was over.

"I don't know what Draper's trying to pull," Val said, with a quick glance at Max. "This isn't his style. He likes night riding without any odds against him."

Max echoed his shot, wondering grimly if they were trapped here and going to be picked

off one by one by the invaders. He heard one of his men grunt in shock, and knew he was hit. He had to try for his horse!

"Morley! Pine Point!" he heard a man shout in the distance. He thought, with a sudden release of tension, that it must be Joe Tindell, riding up with the night guard.

He was crawling slowly toward his horse when he heard the sound of retreating hoofs. Draper's gang was gone. They were not going to risk face-to-face shooting. As swiftly as it began, the gunfire ceased, and the camp seemed eerily silent.

"We got one!" Val came running up excitedly.

"What do you want to do with him?" Virterees asked Max. "He's hit bad."

"I don't care if he's shot to ribbons, tie him on his horse and get him out of here!" Max said in a wicked voice.

He didn't care if some of his crew exchanged shocked glances. He knew this ruthlessness was typical of his own temper in the middle of trouble.

Joe Tindell pounded up with the night riders. "Are we going after them, Morley?"

Max looked quickly around his camp. Gorman was busy tying up Andy Groom's shoulder. This seemed to be the only casualty. The rest of his crew waited tensely, motionlessly, for his answer. He ran his hand through his thick red hair as if to control his killing rage. Draper had to wait, as did finding the reason for this night raid. His herd was running to hell, and he and the crew had to ride after them. They had exactly two days to meet the army contract. He had to think of Pine Point now.

He almost gritted his answer. "We'll go after the herd. Draper will have to wait!"

The men saw the frustrated anger on his face, and carefully remained silent. Only Gorman nodded in agreement, his long face grim. Pine Point and the herd had to come first; that was his way of thinking, too.

"Andy'd better ride for home," Gorman said as he helped the wounded man on his feet.

"I'm all right. I'm sticking with the outfit," Andy protested with quick heat.

At Andy's declaration, Max felt the release of some of his tight anger. This outfit wanted to finish this job with him. He had a shamed guilty feeling that his hate for Waldron had dictated most of his actions. He knew he wanted to prove to Waldron that Pine Point was not dead, not out of love for Pine Point but out of hate for Waldron.

Joe Tindell interrupted his thoughts. "I sent some of the boys ahead to stick with the herd when they broke. I figured they might be able to keep them from scattering to hell and back." His steady eyes were fixed on Max. "Did I do right, Morley?"

Max grinned at him suddenly. "Remind me to give you an interest in Pine when this is finished—if there's anything left after this night."

He turned and ran for his horse. It would be simple to track the herd tonight. The wet ground was deeply gutted by cattle hoofs. And step by step they led away from the army post!

IT SEEMED a long time to Max before he caught up with his herd. The cattle had settled down to a steady pace, running with long easy strides. Max circled them and came up on one of his swing riders. He was making no attempt to check the mad run. At least the herd had not scattered. Given time, they might run themselves out. But, Max thought impatiently, he wasn't going to wait. They would hold them together until the rest of his crew rode up, then attempt to check the run.

Val rode up first, twisting in his saddle with his restless excitement. "Gorman's behind me with the outfit." His voice was hoarse with this night's action.

"Let's go!" Max shouted, and made a wide motion with his arm as he spurred for the lead steers. Val was right behind him.

They came up in front of the herd and opened fire directly in front of their faces. Even with the thundering of hoofs Max thought he heard Val's wild laughter. Only a kid like Val would relish this moment, when one slip of his agile cowpony meant sudden death under those hoofs.

They were succeeding in slowing down the leaders, when they hit a mesquite thicket and had to fight their way through. There was no time now to think of anything but avoiding

the cattle at their heels and the stinging brush that tore at their faces and clothes.

The thicket was about a hundred feet in length, and when Max came out of it he was alone. He realized that only a part of his herd was running behind him. They had scattered while coming through the mesquite. He wondered dismally how long it would take him to gather his scattered herd and reach the post. He thought of Waldron's attempt to get the army contract, and his face burned with defeated anger.

He did not hear the rider coming up; his only thought was to hold this bunch. When he saw the slim shadow galloping toward him, he knew Val had followed him through the thicket. He's only a kid, Max thought in grudging admiration, but when you need someone he's there!

"Do you want to check them?" Val shouted, gesturing with his thin arm, his horse dancing with his own excitement.

Max scowled at him in exasperation. Who did he think he was, Wild Bill? The only thing they could do was let the cattle run themselves out, even though he knew they could cover miles with this steady pace. But he couldn't ask a half-grown kid to do a man's job. Val must have seen the disappointment and indecision mingling on his face, because he lifted his gun from his belt and grinned. He'll probably try to turn them singlehanded, Max thought swiftly, and reached for his Colt.

Even as he rode and fired in front of the herd, he had a fleeting thought of Tina Rhodes and a cold fear for this slim boy dashing wildly in front of the herd. But it wasn't long before the leaders were retreating and, and fast as the rear cattle came up, they too were turned.

Max gave one last look at Val before he rode to the rear to hold the cattle from retreating with his gunfire. The entire time it took to start the cattle milling, his worry centered on the boy. Was he a fool to trust him with a man's work?

Once they had the mill going, Max circled around the herd, his eyes searching anxiously for the boy. When he saw Val circling around the herd, he relaxed loosely in his saddle. He swore under his breath as he wiped the hot perspiration from his face.

The danger of stampede was over now; the only thing left to do was let the cattle wear themselves out in this endless circle. It was daylight when they started grazing. They went placidly about this business, with no evidence of the night's wild run.

Max kept riding a little longer before he motioned to Val on the opposite side. As the boy rode up, Max noticed the livid scratches on his dirty face, and knew Val had taken a beating in the thicket. Despite the faint tired smudges beneath them, his eyes were like black gleaming stars in his expressive face. Max had to grin when he looked at him. For the first time he admitted to himself how much he liked this wild kid.

He stepped down from his horse, untied his canteen, and handed it to Val without a word as they sat there resting.

"Do you think you can hold this bunch while I try to locate the rest of the herd?" Max asked finally. His words proved he no longer had any doubts about the boy.

"Sure," Val answered promptly. He couldn't conceal the high sound of pride in his voice. "Go ahead."

Max studied him for a long moment. "You'll do to ride with, Val," Max said quietly.

You would have thought he had handed the kid the moon.

It was several hours before Max trailed the rest of his herd. Ed Gorman came riding out to meet him, his long face gray in the morning light.

"We held the main bunch, Max," Ed said quickly, knowing this was what he wanted to hear.

MAX nodded, trying to plan ahead. "Val and I held the rest of them just this side of Crazy Creek." He paused to let Ed grasp this. "If we can cross the herd before sundown, we just might make the army deadline tomorrow."

It wasn't a statement, the way he said it; it was more like a tentative suggestion. Gorman kept watching, trying to figure this out.

"You remember Crazy Creek?" Gorman finally asked, his face expressionless.

"Yes," Max said briefly.

And he did. The creek was aptly named. Most of the year it ran placidly along its way, and crossing it was easy. But sometimes,

without reason or warning, a light rain would make the water rise with swift undercurrents of danger.

"There's a good crossing just below the old Indian Trail," Gorman said slowly, almost as if he were following Max's thoughts.

Max tried to find some expression on his face that might help him now. But that wasn't Gorman's way. The decision was for Max to make, and Gorman would go along with it.

"We'll make a try," Max said wtih a slow reluctance—almost as if he had a premonition of the tragedy to come in crossing Crazy Creek.

It was the middle of the afternoon before they joined the entire herd. There was still several hours of sun left, and the day was warm. Max tried to reason away an uneasy feeling. He knew his men were tired, after almost thirty-six hours in the saddle. Then there were the unpredictable actions of Crazy Creek. But he couldn't shrug the thought of Waldron and the army contract. That was the spur to goad him on.

He crossed Crazy Creek first and found the water swift, but with only a short span of swimming for his horse in the center. This was always a tricky business, he reasoned silently, and he always felt this same anxiety until the cattle were safely grazing on the opposite bank.

Gorman and Joe Tindell were riding lead swing. He motioned for them to come ahead. The lead steers started across with only a little urging, and the rest of the herd followed.

Max re-crossed the creek to help bring up the rear, then hauled short on the bank. Trouble broke loose without any warning. He never knew why the crossing went bad. It might have been the stampede the night before turning the cattle uneasy now. He couldn't tell. A few of the lead steers were down on the opposite bank, and the cattle behind were trying to turn in the swift water. They were running into the oncoming herd. He saw the steers bobbing downstream with a sickening speed in the swift current.

In this moment he saw Val in the middle of the milling uproar. For one paralyzing moment his heart stood still and his breath caught in his dry throat. His only thought was to reach the kid. As he beat viciously at the steers in his way, he thought for a brief moment that Val's usual luck was going to save him. He tried to shout a warning above the hellish din of the bawling cattle, but knew he had failed.

He saw the huge steer that caught at Val's pony and pulled him under. He never knew he kept on shouting Val's name as his burning eyes searched the turbulent water. Val never came up; there was not even a sign of his horse. Max's own horse was swimming in the swift current now at what must have been the very spot where Val went down. But there was nothing here.

He didn't realize that the panic in the creek had been quieted by Gorman and his crew. They were even now pushing the rest of the herd across and succeeding in halting the milling in mid-stream. He was only vaguely aware of Ed Gorman's joining him to search for Val.

Gorman's long face was gray and ugly as he rode. He crouched low in his saddle as he went downstream and back, over and over.

The herd was grazing on the opposite bank, but still Max searched the creek. It didn't seem possible that this narrow creek could swallow Val; nothing ever seemed to touch the kid. There was no reality in this scene. Death ought to come at night, with the dark to hide its tears, not in the bright sunlight.

IT WAS several hours before Gorman spoke to him. His anxious eyes searched Max's haggard face and his voice was oddly hoarse and gentle.

"It's no use, Max. He's gone."

Max swung on him, his eyes murderous. "Get away from me! I'm going to find the kid!"

Gorman's face didn't change as he turned away without speaking. He stayed with Max until the sun went down, his body stiff and numb from the cold water.

"Come on, Max," he urged then, quietly. "Let's get out of this."

Max didn't answer him, didn't even hear him now. He rode down the creek and back, his thoughts filled with the misery of his own hell. He blamed himself. His only thought had been to beat Waldron any way he could, to kill him. He could have waited until morning to cross Crazy Creek, but he had been

afraid Waldron would get the army contract. Not once had he thought of this kid's wanting a chance to prove himself a man. Now Val was dead because of his hate.

Gorman never left Max. Finally, when his horse stumbled wearily in the creek and Gorman spoke to him again, he let himself be led from the water. He followed Gorman dazedly, his face a pale mask. He could accept it now. Joe Tindell stepped away from the fire in camp and brought him a hot cup of coffee as he sat down. He had to use both hands to grip the cup, but he did not even feel the scalding coffee he held.

"Andy and Virterees?" Gorman muttered to Joe after a quick look around camp.

"They rode downstream to search," Joe answered carefully.

Max heard them, all right. He knew they were still searching the bank for Val. He thought coldly and madly, Draper will pay for his part in this night!

Andy and Virterees rode in later. Max glanced swiftly at their faces and they silently shook their heads. He got up from beside the fire and walked with his queer stilted gait back and forth as he talked.

"We'll camp here until we find the boy's body. His sister will want that comfort."

His crew remained silent. They must have known this meant the loss of the army contract, perhaps the end of Pine. It didn't make any difference.

It was two days later when they rode away from Crazy Creek. Gorman rode over to talk to Major Hilmar at the post. He learned that the major had decided to accept Waldron's bid for the contract. Max Morley had lost. The major implied he had no confidence in the red-headed drifter. No man in the outfit was surprised. It was almost as if they had known this would happen since the night Draper raided their camp and stampeded their herd.

Max turned his back on Crazy Creek and spoke to his men.

"We'll take the herd home," he said, "and then we'll pay a little visit in Prairie Dog."

It was a silent crew that mounted their horses and started the drive back to Tularosa.

Max waited long enough to see his cattle grazing on Pine range before he rode into the hills. I must tell Tina Rhodes first, he thought tiredly. Draper will wait. He had to be the man to tell Tina about Val. He could not reason away his own feeling of guilt. For too many years his only thought had been hate.

Tina came to the door of the cabin. Almost before he spoke she seemed to know something had happened. He saw the fear on her face—perhaps because he rode alone.

"May I come in, Tina?" he asked in a strained voice.

Her eyes never left his face as she stepped back into the house. "What's happened to Val?" she asked. Her words seemed to catch in her throat.

He told her quickly, without anything to soften the story. He mentioned only briefly Draper's raid on the herd. He watched her face turn so pale that a few light freckles suddenly stood out across her cheeks. Her eyes darkened until they were strangely translucent. He felt a cold shock of fear and stepped toward her. She's going to faint, he thought. But she turned on him without warning and beat at his face and chest with small fists.

"It's your fault!" she screamed at him almost incoherently. "You didn't care about anything except getting even with Waldron and his wife! That's why I was afraid for Val to ride with you!"

"Tina!" His eyes were anxious as her slim body trembled uncontrollably with her hysterical outburst.

THERE was no reasoning with her now. He gripped her arms with hard hands to quiet her shaking. She didn't even hear his voice; she was a slim tawny wildcat. In his panic he remembered that you could sometimes quiet hysteria with a sharp slap, and he raised his hand.

But when he looked down at her pale contorted face he knew he couldn't hit her. He lifted her bodily against him and sat down in the chair with her in his arms. He tightened his arms around her until she couldn't move, and when she opened her mouth to scream he kissed her.

Her soft wet lips moved against his, and he made his mouth rough with hard insistence until he felt the violent trembling leave her

body. It was a long moment before her eyes blazed up at him and he felt the wild beating of her heart pounding against his hand. He noticed the uneven movement of her breast beneath the thin cotton dress. He stood up quickly and put her on her feet.

Hot color flamed in his face as he looked down at her. "I'm sorry, Tina. I only did that to help you." He silently cursed the stammering words.

"I know," she whispered. She put her hand up to her bruised mouth, but when she saw him watching her she pulled it down quickly. "I didn't know you could have any feeling for anyone except hate."

He fumbled in his shirt pocket for his sack of tobacco. His hand seemed to burn from the touch of her. He concentrated on the cigarette he was making when he spoke again.

"You're right about my hating Waldron, Tina," he said slowly, feeling his way. "It's always been that way, since we were kids. Maybe it began when my father told me he wished Burr was his son instead of me. I was kind of a wild kid, like Val. I hated Burr before I knew Cecily. After he married her I knew I had to leave Tularosa or kill him. I would have stayed if it hadn't been for my father." There was an odd release in telling this sensitive girl these things he had never told anyone before. He went on, "I did try to watch out for Val. I understood him."

"I think I knew that, Max," she said, and turned her face away so he couldn't see her tears.

He held himself rigid to keep from touching her now. When he started toward the door she stopped him.

"Are you going after Draper?" she asked quietly, and he didn't answer. "And after that it will be Burr—because of Cecily."

His mouth hardened as he looked at her. "If I had time I think I could show you that it isn't because of Cecily any longer."

Tina flushed a little under his steady look, and he closed the door after him quickly. He threw his cigarette down in vicious distaste. It was time to think of Draper.

His whole Pine Point crew waited for him in the yard. Ed Gorman sat stoically in their lead, his dead cigarette motionless in his thin mouth.

"You didn't think we were going to let you ride to Prairie Dog alone, did you?" Gorman asked caustically.

"All right," Max said shortly, his face tight with strain.

Gorman smiled at him. "Let's ride," he said, and spat the cigarette from the side of his mouth. He lifted his reins.

"Wait up, Max," Joe Tindell said warningly. He was staring down the valley road. A swirl of copper dust kicked up to conceal the riders coming toward them.

"Someone is in a hurry to join our party," Gorman muttered drily.

Even before they reined up in the yard Max sensed it would be Burr Waldron. He didn't like it. Some stray thought kept worrying him. But he couldn't quite bring it to the surface of his mind, but he knew it had to do with this moment.

Gorman and his crew waited motionless. Waldron rode up, with Sheriff Olan behind him. Burr's dark face was boldly determined.

"I heard about Draper's raid," Burr announced. "If you're riding on Prairie Dog, we have a right to go along. I want that wild bunch cleaned out of the hills."

Max closed his mouth grimly against his quick protest. He had a strong feeling against riding with Burr, and it wasn't only the long-standing hate between them. It wasn't like Burr to ride with him—even against Draper. Burr wouldn't care if Draper cleaned out Max's range.

Olan was watching him closely. "I told you once before, Max, this concerns the whole valley. Burr has a right to get in this."

Gorman spoke up before Max had a chance. "The party is free," he said laconically.

Before Max could add anything, Gorman lifted his reins and rode out. There was a slightly baffled look on Max's face as he followed.

PRAIRIE DOG was settled back in the hills, almost facing the desert to the west. The entire town consisted of a few drab buildings, with one two-story building in the center of the narrow street. This seemed to be a saloon on the ground floor, with rooms upstairs.

They made no pretense at trying to get into

town unobserved. Draper knew every man who rode in the hills, and he must have known after his night raid that the Pine outfit would be after him.

There was no one on the street as they rode in. Only a few horses stood by the tie rack outside the saloon. This is a hell of a town, Max thought as his attention quickened. It's a refuge for any man riding away from something, and there'd be no questions asked.

"You think he's here?" Joe Tindell asked with a trace of excitement in his voice.

"He's here," Gorman said shortly.

Max silently agreed. Draper would be here. This was his town. He had built it here on the edge of the desert, and he would not leave it now.

They reined in a short distance from the saloon. Max stepped down. Suddenly Burr Waldron stood beside him in the street, and Max's attention became divided in this moment.

"Draper, come out and talk!" Max shouted.

It was dead quiet on the street when Draper kicked open the batwing doors. "I'm throwing down my gun." Draper called plainly.

Waldron lifted his gun and shot him. His first bullet spun Draper around, and the second swift shot caught him stumbling forward. He was dead when he hit the dirt.

"My God!" The shocked words seemed to burst from Olan.

The men were silent, unable to look at each other. It was one thing to shoot a man in an even draw, but Draper had thrown his gun down and wanted to talk.

"Maybe this will put an end to the trouble in Tularosa," Burr said calmly

"Not yet," Max said softly. "I have a question. Even Draper deserved better than that, Burr. Why didn't you let him talk first?"

"I have another question."

The light feminine voice swung the men around; they hadn't heard the horse coming down the street. Tina Rhodes sat behind them. Her face was pale and she moved in the saddle in a way that reminded Max of Val. The same look of recklessness shone in her eyes. She looked directly at Max.

"Ask Waldron why he met Draper in the hills the night before the raid on your herd," Tina said clearly.

Now Val's words came back to Max: the raid on his herd wasn't Draper's style. He turned back to Waldron. "I'd like to know the answer to that one too, Burr. Why did you ride in the hills?"

Waldron faced him now. "Sure I rode in the hills," he said, his face dark and strange.

"You sent Draper to stampede my herd?" Max asked.

"That's right," Burr said plainly. "I'd have done anything in the world to beat you, Max. Ever since we were kids, you always got everything you wanted without lifting a hand. You could walk away and always come back to find Pine waiting for you. You could smile at a girl and she'd come to you. Except Cecily; I had her."

"Did you, Burr?" Max asked softly.

"If I knew I'd burn in hell forever, I'd still try to kill you, Max," Burr said slowly.

He moved then. Max had known he would. The killing hate in him would not wait. In that same instant Max lifted his gun, his thumb already releasing the hammer.

He felt the searing heat of Burr's bullet above his shoulder. It was too high. Burr was stumbling forward, lifting his gun for another shot. He kept falling as he fired again, the bullet squirting up the dust in front of him.

Max stood still staring at him. It was hard to believe he was dead. It was finished, and it had been a long time in motion. A strange thought came to Max—he still hated Waldron.

Olan spoke in a numb puzzled voice. "I never thought Waldron would have anything to do with Draper. He hated the hill people!"

"Not as much as he hated me," Max said.

"You're not riding again, Max?" Gorman asked.

Max made a slight motion toward Tina.

"Not before I talk to her," he said.

Tina didn't turn around when he rode alongside her.

"You're free to go to Cecily now," she said.

Max dismounted, holding her reins so she couldn't ride off. "I told you once that if I had time I could prove something to you!"

She looked at him then and moved so quickly he had her slim body hard against him for his answer, the answer to everything.

a

true story

by M. R. KRYTHE

THE WRECK OF THE YANKEE BLADE

DURING Gold Rush days every available steamer along the Pacific Coast was rushed into service to carry passengers from Panama to San Francisco. Such ships were crowded with adventurers eager to reach the gold diggings. Early in the fifties, the Pacific Mail and the United States Mail steamship companies lowered their fares to fight the opposition line owned by Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, who had sent his sturdy new Yankee Blade, a vessel of 2500 tons, around the Horn.

When the two firms decided to get rid of their powerful competitor, the commodore sold his steamers to them—but on his own terms. The Yankee Blade was to be delivered to the Pacific Mail steamship line after completing her first voyage from San Francisco to

Panama. But, unluckily for her new owners, this ship was wrecked in the fall of 1854, while on her way down the West Coast.

Shipwrecks were common here, because of heavy fogs and dangerous uncharted rocks. Many lives were lost in these wrecks, and valuable cargoes of gold dust and bullion still rest in the depths of the waters along the Pacific shore. But the passengers of the Yankee Blade were lucky. At the time she was wrecked, the Goliah, a gallant little steamer, was nearby, and made one of the most daring and thrilling rescues in California history.

The Goliah, built for use as a towboat, was put into the Pacific Coast service during Gold Rush days, and ran between San Francisco and San Diego, stopping at several way points. Commanded in 1854 by Captain Salisbury Haley, she sailed from the northern port just six hours after the much larger Yankee Blade, with her rich cargo, left San Francisco.

On the second morning out, the little vessel ran into a heavy fog, and her officers became alarmed as they heard the roar of breakers. But when Captain Haley started to change his course and run out to sea, he and his crew heard loud cries for help above the noise of the waves.

When the fog lifted, the men on the Goliah saw the Yankee Blade, now a hopeless wreck. She had settled on a sunken rock on the northeast side of Port Arguello, the most northern part of Point Concepcion. As one of the passengers later described the scene, it was "an awful picture of men and women clinging to the rail, the rigging, and the tops of the deck houses."

What Captain Haley and his officers didn't find out until much later was that a gang of hoodlums, angry over the strict watch kept on gold shipments from San Francisco, had taken passage on the Yankee Blade. She was carrying eight hundred persons and a large amount of gold. Many of the travelers had large sums of money in their possession, too. As soon as the steamer left the Golden Gate, most of the gang of toughs got drunk and began to insult the women on board.

Their leader had planned to take control of the ship and its treasure. However, as his men were drunk, he changed his plan and ordered the officer on the bridge to beach the Yankee Blade on the northern shore of Point Concepcion. But the ship ran too close to the dangerous shoreline and hit a submerged rock, and her stern began to sink.

Later the purser, Samuel Vought, declared that as soon as the vessel struck, lifeboats were manned, and Captain Randall went ashore "to find a proper place to land his passengers," leaving his son to carry out his orders on the wrecked craft. The bandits had taken over most of the lifeboats, but had loaded them so heavily with gold and liquor that they sank. So the desperadoes lost their booty. Several women and children were drowned when other lifeboats were swamped by the heavy seas.

Meantime the remaining passengers were holding on to the ship, but fearful that she might slip off the rock at any moment. Just as it appeared that the Yankee Blade was about to break in two, the fog lifted, and the terrified people saw the little Goliah close by. They must have felt that Providence had sent her to save them.

At once Captain Haley decided on a plan to rescue these unfortunate passengers. But when he explained his idea to the officers, they said it was too dangerous, as far as the small Goliah was concerned. The dauntless Captain wouldn't listen to their pleas. He backed his ship close to the Yankee Blade and dropped a line overboard. This was fastened to the great hawser on the wrecked vessel. Then the Goliah moved away, the rope was pulled taut, and a lifeboat was attached to the line.

Since the would-be robbers were in control of the Yankee Blade (unknown to Captain Haley) some of them were the first to be rescued—even though Captain Haley had called through his trumpet, "Send the women and children off first!" Before the officers on the wreck could gain control of their ship again, they had to get rid of about a hundred of the toughs. This took nearly an hour, but after that most of the women and children reached the Goliah safely.

AS SPACE was limited on the little steamer, two lifeboats were used to transfer passengers to the nearby beach. Since Captain Haley and his crew didn't know at first what had happened on the Yankee Blade, he was taken by surprise

when the desperadoes came aboard and took over the cabins, including those set apart for the ladies. When Captain Haley ordered them to vacate them, they refused to budge.

A woman passenger told him what had happened on the Yankee Blade, and the captain decided on a surprise attack. He asked Aleck Bell, of Los Angeles, to get an armed group together to overpower the gang. Haley told him to drive them forward to the steerage. "Hit them over the heads, but don't shoot. I desire this to be a bloodless victory."

Bell and his men took possession of the after end of the cabin. He ordered the intruders to go forward and leave the cabins to the women and children. When no one moved, Aleck yelled, "Charge 'em, boys!" and at the same time hit one of the desperado leaders over the head with a revolver.

This attack was so unexpected that the bandits were driven like sheep to the steerage, and were held there under guard. Later these toughs were marched out between two rows of heavily armed men, took their places in the lifeboats, and were deposited ashore.

During the rescue, the sea continued very rough. "The staunch old Goliah strained, groaned, and writhed in agony, and all those on board thought she would be pulled in pieces," one witness later said. All day long the gallant little craft labored and creaked as great waves washed over her bow and deck. Finally the last passengers were taken off the wreck and set on shore. This came just in time, for not long before dark a heavy wind came up and the Yankee Blade disappeared forever into the depths of the Pacific.

However, the faithful Goliah hadn't yet finished her job. After a rough night at sea, she landed some of the travelers at San Pedro, and others at San Diego. Then the sturdy little steamer headed northward again, picked up some survivors left on the beach, and took them to San Francisco.

After this disaster to the Yankee Blade, her captain, Henry Randall, was blamed for his cowardice in being first to leave the ship, and for putting his son, "an incompetent boy," in charge of the steamer, where much disorder followed and crimes were committed.

The ship officials returned to the unlucky survivors only one-fourth of the money they had paid for their passage to Panama or on to New York. Perhaps they got out of paying the full amount by a clause that gave the travelers passage on the Yankee Blade only. Also, there may have been some doubt as to which company was responsible, since Commodore Vanderbilt had sold the steamer to another line.

However, in spite of the loss of their money and baggage, the rescued passengers considered themselves lucky to be alive. And they expressed their heart-felt gratitude to Captain Haley and the crew of the Goliah. For never was there more gallant rescue work at sea, especially with the additional difficulty of dealing with a gang of desperate bandits.

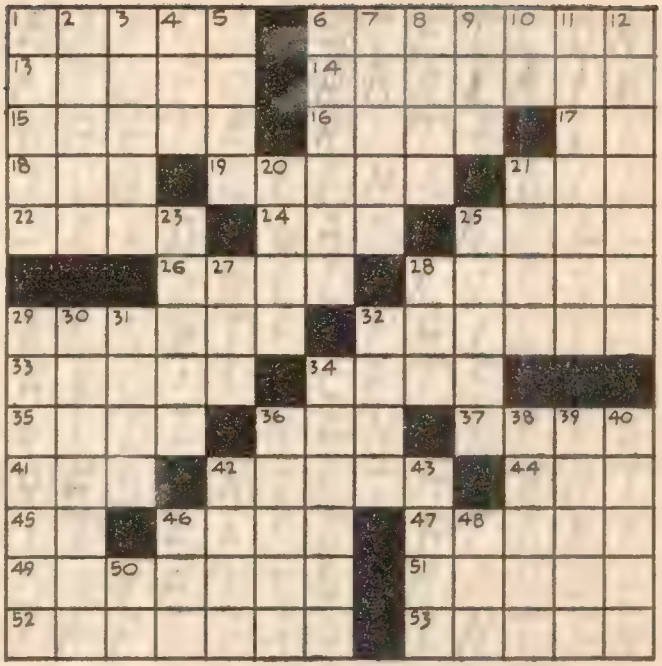
As one contemporary declared, "Captain Haley performed one of the most remarkable, dangerous, and successful nautical feats known in the history of seamanship."

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 39)

1. Midnight.
2. Pistols.
3. Ute.
4. A homesteader, since there were 160 acres in a homestead.
5. Buffalo.
6. Because buzzards also carry and spread disease.
7. Plenty of endurance.
8. These are all post offices in Texas.
9. Santa Fe, New Mexico.
10. Morral.

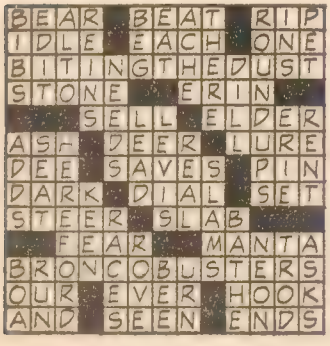
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Owner's mark on cattle
6 Western hat
13 Wild West show
14 Western treeless land
15 Playing marble
16 Ceremony
17 French article
18 To pull at
19 Appears to be
21 Auction offer
22 Fruit stone
24 Existed
25 Christmas carol
26 Was in debt
28 Roy's Trigger is one
29 The Lone —
32 Calico horses
33 To keep away from
34 Mouse hunters
35 Broad
36 Galloped
37 Hearing organs
41 Possesses
42 Opposite to south
44 Baseball club
45 The thing
46 To gallop slowly
47 To make amends
49 Makes a donation
51 Red cosmetic
52 Pencil rubbers
53 To go in



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Annoying children
2 Rascal
3 A saying
4 Fishing snare
5 Accomplishes
6 Ranch
7 Decorates
8 Has lunch
9 Necktie
10 Senior (abbr.)
11 Most oily
12 Sewing implements
20 Water pitcher
21 Brought into existence
23 Motherless calf
25 Racket; din
27 To marry
28 Head covering
29 Untanned cattle skin
30 Airplane pilot
31 Bows the head
32 To gasp
34 To fondle
36 Lassoer
38 Approximately
39 Cattle land
40 Western beef animal
42 Short letter
43 Jack rabbit
46 — Vegas, Nevada
48 2000 pounds
50 North America (abbr.)

THE RACE

NOBODY TRUSTED Eddie Morrow, the quiet stranger . . . or believed that he would sell his gun skill for love, but not for money

EDDIE MORROW jammed his hands into his hip pockets and stared at the floor. He could feel Barbie's eyes on him—and Sam's. He wasn't used to being the center of a conversation. Shuffling his feet, he felt his face glow like a branding iron.

"I don't like it, letting Eddie ride shotgun for us in the stagecoach race," Sam Knowlton said, thumping his desk. He cuffed back his hat to peer at Eddie, distrust plain in his thick red face. A large man, he was hollow-faced now from ill-health. "I don't like it one little bit."

"It can't hurt," Red Tinker, Sam's stagecoach driver, said.

Sam snorted. "It can't hurt? It just might cost us the race, that's all. How do we know we can trust him? He's only been with us a couple of months."

Barbie Knowlton came away from the front window and stood near Eddie. Anger sparkled in her dark eyes. "He hasn't been here long, Dad," she said, "but when he came, he stayed. Remember last month when you lost the franchise to Prairie Flat and couldn't pay your crews? They all left you except Red and Eddie."

"I know that," Sam snapped. "Sure, Red stuck. He's worked for me nine-ten years. But how come a kid like Eddie is so all-fired glad to stay on, working for bed and board?"

Red chuckled and slumped deeper into his chair. His spine, rubberized by countless miles of driving lurching coaches, easily conformed to any contour for the utmost comfort.

"Shucks, Sam," he said broadly, "any man'd be proud to ride with me, the world's best driver—even without getting paid."

"I'll tell you why he stays," Sam said. "He doesn't need money from me. McCoy's paying him to use that gun of his against me."

"Now hold on," Eddie said. "Have you got any proof of that?"

"You hold on," Sam said. "Have you any proof you aren't secretly working for McCoy?"

Eddie glanced at Barbie, then shrugged and again fixed his gaze on the floor. Why were they making such a fuss about his staying on? Was Sam too old, couldn't Red see that Barbie was a chestnut-haired filly any fellow'd give his right arm to corral? Why else would he stick with this broken down stageline? And why the conniptions about his being good with a gun? Some men could run fast, some could rope a fly by the hind foot, some could ride anything with a tail.

Eddie just happened to have a gun hand as swift and deadly as lightning.

Red gave a snort of disgust. "McCoy, McCoy, McCoy," he said. "A man comes to town, makes money running a saloon and right away you call him an owlhoot. Why, Sam, if McCoy were as bad as you make out, he'd've been lynched a hundred times by now."

"He's too slick for that," Sam said. "He never does his own dirty work. He hires someone to do it for him—like this kid. You've seen Eddie use a sixgun and a Winchester. He's too good to be riding shotgun. If he's honest, why isn't he somebody's deputy? I'm leary of anyone who shoots as well as he does."

Barbie stamped a small foot. "Why do you keep calling Eddie a kid?"

"I don't like it and I won't have it," Sam

By TEDDY KELLER

said, ignoring her. "I'll ride shotgun with Red tomorrow."

"You'll do not such thing," Barbie said. She advanced toward the desk, shaking a warning finger. "You know the doctor told you to take it easy. You'll stay here if I have to tie you in bed." She straightened, and regarded her father grimly. "I can handle a gun—and a team, too. If Eddie doesn't ride with Red tomorrow, I will."

"Fifteen miles there and fifteen miles back?" Sam snorted.

At that moment the office door creaked. Eddie turned. It was Sheriff Garst.

"Howdy, lawman," Red said.

Eddie drifted toward the side of the room, glad to be out of the center of things. Barbie moved in the same direction. Garst waved a lanky arm in brief greeting. When he saw Barbie, he yanked off his Stetson. Then he ambled forward and took a chair near Red.

"Sam," Garst said slowly, "I'm doing my best to keep tomorrow's race honest."

"Hurrah for the sheriff," Red shouted.

"Shut up," Sam growled. "Let him talk."

Garst grinned and crossed his long legs. He hooked his hat over a spindly knee and rubbed the furrows of his lean, sad face. "Whatever happens tomorrow, Sam, your coach has to win."

"What does that mean?" Sam asked, glancing at Eddie.

"I just have a feeling," Garst said. "I figure McCoy's starting the race with marked cards. And I think he's going to have a whole deck of aces up his sleeve."

"McCoy is a big, bad man," Red said. "He's going to shoot us all and get rich selling our bones to the coyotes."

THIS time Garst didn't grin. He said. "Red, with your reputation as a driver, you're the one that ought to be worried, not me."

"Then what're you fretting about?" Red asked.

"I'm worried about what's ahead," Garst said. "The government says a hundred miles of franchise and the mail contract go to the stageline winning the race to Monte Vista and back—no questions asked, winner take all."

Sam asked, "Why do you figure McCoy's so interested in getting this mail contract?"

"What else but gold?" Garst said. "Half the mines in the mountains are shipping bullion through Monte Vista. If McCoy's line carries the stuff, he's going to know when it's coming through. And he'll know when they have passengers who're packing their own dust. All he has to do is arrange a little holdup, and he's rich. Before his contract runs out or before we could get him legally, he'd've made a dozen fortunes."

Red muttered, "You're just guessing."

"Maybe I am," Garst said, "but McCoy's so steamed up about the race he must have something big in mind. He has three coaches entered."

"That's not right," Red protested. "How can he have more than one entry?"

"Oh, they're under somebody else's name, but they're his. And if he wins the race, my hands are tied. I can't keep him from getting the contract."

Sam hunched forward, his face dark. "With that much at stake, McCoy's liable to pull anything tomorrow. We need protection."

"I wish I could give you protection," Garst said, taking makings from his shirt pocket. He shook his head. "If I had my way, there'd be a government referee posted, every half mile." He spread his hands, scattering tobacco. "I have one deputy. That's not enough even to handle things right here in town."

"It doesn't look good," Sam said.

Barbie stepped toward the desk. "If you know McCoy's going to do something, why don't you arrest him?"

"I don't have anything on him." Garst licked the cigarette paper. Then, lighting up, he said, "I pegged McCoy for a polecat when he hit town. I found out where he came from and wrote the marshal there. They didn't have anything on him, either. They said he made money quick and pulled out fast. He's careful, McCoy is. He makes a lot of mud pies, but doesn't get his hands dirty."

Eddie was beginning to understand Sam's suspicions of him, a stranger. And he began to realize how much he'd let himself in for, simply by hanging around Barbie.

Sam peered helplessly about the room. "What can we do?"

"You might try praying" Garst said, standing. He put a hand to Red's flame-colored hair and mussed it. "Stay sober, boy, and win that race, or else we'll have more trouble'n I want." He took a pull at his smoke, nodded to Sam and Barbie, glanced for a long moment at Eddie, then smiled wanly and ambled out.

Eddie edged away from the wall where he had been standing. He was aware that he hadn't spoken for a long time. His mouth was full of cotton. "Sam," he said hesitantly, "I want to ride with Red tomorrow."

He might as well have announced that he had just scalped his grandmother. They all turned on him. Red was still half amused by the whole thing. Barbie had paled, accentuating the crescent of freckles across her nose. She was scared. Indecision flickered behind the transparent screen of Sam's eyes. His mouth set in a rigid line.

"If I were ten years younger, we'd show McCoy tomorrow." Then futility seeped into his tone. "I can't, though. The doctor says no. I still don't like it, but there's nothing else to do. All right, you ride shotgun tomorrow. If you pull one shenanigan, you'd better start shooting the next time you see me, because I swear I'll kill you. And from now till race time, you'll ride herd on Red. Keep him sober, keep him out of trouble, and keep him away from McCoy's saloon. We have to win." He broke off, his face clouding, and stared ahead vacantly. With pathetic fi-

nality he said, "We have to win."

Barbie moved to her father's side. Red stood, beckoned to Eddie, and went out. Eddie followed quickly, feeling the importance of his responsibility. He hurried after Red. The driver strode along the boardwalk for a ways, then halted.

"Okay, kid," he said, clapping Eddie on the shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You'll see me tomorrow, all right, and all the time in between."

"Okay, little brother," Red said without humor. "Tag along." He wheeled and stomped into a cafe.

They had a quiet supper together and finished a final cup of coffee as the sun dived out of sight, sending up a brilliant splash.

RED stood suddenly, leaned across the table, and glared down. "Look, kid, I'm getting tired of this. I'm going to McCoy's for a drink, then I'm going to bed. I don't need you; I don't want you. Go away."

"Sure thing," Eddie said, standing and grinning. "Thanks for the invite. Let's go."

Red cursed, slammed a silver dollar on the table, and stalked out and across to McCoy's saloon. There he shoved angrily through the batwings and pushed up against the bar.

"Whisky," he barked.

As Eddie bellied up, the bartender brought out a bottle and a glass. Eddie snatched them. Smiling, he poured the glass full, slopping whisky onto the bar and floor. He set the drink in front of Red and tossed the bottle to the bartender.

"One," he said. "That's all."

Laughter burst from a back table. Eddie turned and recognized Yeager, one of McCoy's men. The man stood, slapping his leg, and moved toward the bar. But there was no mirth in the cold blue eyes. The hard face strained to hold the unaccustomed smile. The rawhide body was too tense for one who seemingly was in so hilarious a mood. And the gun hung too low. He elbowed between Red and Eddie.

"What's ailing you, Yeager?" Red snapped.

"Never thought I'd see the day," Yeager said. "I've been watching you around town —you and your bodyguard. Can't you wipe your own nose?"

"Shut up," Red snapped.

This what what Eddie had been expecting. Here was McCoy's play. It wouldn't take much to blow Red sky high. "Come on," Eddie said. "It's time to go."

"And you shut up, too," Red blurted.

Yeager winked extravagantly to the men at his table and nudged Red. "Hey," he whispered hoarsely, "get rid of this kid and let me buy you a drink."

The entire saloon seemed to hold its breath, waiting. Everybody was in on it, Eddie figured. He glanced back at Red and caught Yeager's gesture to the bartender. The barkeep bent down, then handed Yeager a glass of milk. Yeager bowed and presented it to Red.

Red's face blazed. With his left hand he chopped at the glass. With his right he reached for his gun. Yeager was way ahead of him. But Eddie was ahead of them both. Yeager's gun was halfway up when Eddie shoved his into the gunslinger's back. The glass of milk crashed into the silence.

"Just ease that gun back into leather," Eddie said coolly. "Then turn slow and walk out of here. One wrong move and you'll be dead before you hit the floor."

Yeager slid his gun home and squared his shoulders. When he turned, grinding broken glass under his boots, a vicious fire burned in his eyes. He had been beaten in the presence of men who feared and respected his skill. Humiliation added fuel.

"You're kind of fast, kid," he said. "But next time you do that I'll be looking—and I'll kill you." He shouldered past Eddie and out of the saloon.

Eddie holstered his gun and fixed Red with a sober stare. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"Okay," Red said grumpily. "You saved me from the big, bad bully. Now do you want to put me to bed?"

Again laughter rolled through the saloon. Red turned slowly, facing the tables, retrieving from each laughing man a speck of his lost self-respect. Eddie leaned against the bar and let him enjoy it. He knew it was tough on the old hand to take such coddling. Finally Red grinned, waved, and moved toward the swinging doors. Eddie fell into step

behind him. They were almost out.

"Red." It was McCoy, sitting at a front table. When they paused, he said, "I swear I don't know what got into Yeager. Just to show there are no hard feelings, how about joining us for a few hands?"

McCoy was half turned in his chair, the smile on his pale, handsome face as cordial as a parson's. He stood and gestured to an empty place opposite his. He was tall, well proportioned. His expensive suit was a sleek fit, with no hint of a sixgun bulge on the hip or under the arm.

"Come along, Red," McCoy coaxed, "if your guardian dosn't mind."

That did it. Eddie put out a hand to stop him, but Red shrugged it off and went to the table. When he sat, somebody shoved a bottle near him. He took a drink and bought chips. Eddie moved behind him, hooking a boot over a chair rung.

McCoy dealt blackjack with quick, sure hands. Eddie knew it was coming, but, closely as he watched, he could spot nothing wrong. Still, the manipulation had to be there. Red won three quick hands and still another, while McCoy beat the other players.

ON THE fifth round, McCoy clumsily gave Red a middle card. Red was the only man in the saloon who missed seeing him do it; he was too intent on his own cards. Eddie saw, and knew it was useless to try to get Red out of this spot. He could only wait and hope. Red had thirteen. He called for a hit. With deliberate clumsiness, again McCoy pulled out a ten and flipped it across the table. This time the gesture was obvious. The muscles tightened beneath Red's worn buckskin shirt. When McCoy reached for chips, Red slammed down and seized the outstretched wrist. With the other hand he reached for his gun.

"Deal off the top," he said evenly.

McCoy glanced up in surprise, grinned, and shrugged free. He moved as if to deal a card from the top; then his right hand darted into his left sleeve. He had a hideout gun.

Red's chair scraped back. He bolted up, clawing for his gun. Eddie reached with his left, got a hand on Red's shoulder, and shoved. McCoy's derringer spat flame at thin air where Red's chest had been an instant before. As Red crashed to the floor, Eddie's .45 flicked up. He leveled it at McCoy's nose.

"Some time," he said, fighting for calm, "I'll remember this gun has a trigger, and somebody's soul and body will part company."

Red picked himself up and kicked his chair aside. Without a word he stomped to the batwings. Eddie followed. He didn't holster his gun till he was outside. Red waited, smiling sheepishly.

"Guess I'm an old fool, Eddie. That's twice you saved my hide."

"It's not worth it," Eddie said, "but that's my job." He thumped Red's shoulder and they moved up the boardwalk together.

"Hey, Red."

They whirled. It was McCoy, leaning on an open batwing.

"You forgot your hat," he called.

Red patted his bare head and grinned. Apparently he'd lost the old Stetson when Eddie pushed him down. He started back.

"No, Red," Eddie said.

He put a hand on the driver's shoulder. This time Red obeyed. Eddie strode to the saloon and pushed inside. Moving back toward McCoy, he looked for the hat. Outside, two shots exploded. Eddie spun, and the scene etched itself in his brain.

A cowpoke had frozen halfway through the swinging doors, holding one wide. Behind him, lights across the street silhouetted the figure of the gunman. His hat was pulled so low that Eddie couldn't see his features. The man was in a deep crouch, almost a squat, with his .45 thrust out at chin level. He was probably a veteran of many gunfights, who had learned to dodge and duck, giving his adversary only a small moving target.

Then Eddie was bringing up his gun. But before he could thumb back the hammer, the gunman was gone. Eddie sprang through the doors, knowing what he would see. Up the boardwalk, a man was sprawled on his face. In the flickering light Eddie could see the flame-colored hair, the spreading crimson stain on the back of the worn buckskin jacket.

He peered around hopelessly, knowing the gunman's escape on the darkened street was

assured. And then he had to force himself to approach the fallen man. Across the street, a woman cried out. People ran toward the still form. Eddie pushed his way through the gathering crowd. When at last he stood on the inner circle, Barbie and Sam were kneeling beside Red.

"Okay," McCoy said, stepping around Red and speaking to Eddie. "You earned your money, but I don't like the way you shot Red. You didn't give him a chance." He tossed a double eagle at Eddie's boots. "That's the price you asked."

"That's a dirty lie," Eddie said, dropping his hand near his gun.

"I won't draw on you," McCoy said. "You can make me back down or apologize or whatever you want, but these folks won't forget what I said."

That was it, and Eddie knew it. He had figured McCoy for a slick gambler, but not for a conniver like this. Sam had had two men to help him win the stagecoach race. Now one was dead, the other forever damned.

Barbie stood, and Sam struggled up beside her. His gaze of pure hatred found Eddie. Cursing wildly, he groped for his gun. Barbie caught his wrist and batted it down, then fell sobbing into his arms. Eddie turned and drifted away. In his mind were two scenes he'd never forget—Red's body, and a crouching gunslick.

Eddie didn't sleep much that night. Nor did he have breakfast. He held to his room, steeling himself against the possibility of meeting Sam or Barbie. Finally he went to the stable. They weren't there.

HE SET immediately to harnessing the race team. He was backing the horses to the Concord when Barbie came in. She wore a small Stetson, denim pants, a jacket of soft doeskin, a bright gingham shirt, and boots. Sam's big .44 was thrust into her belt. She cradled a Winchester. When she saw Eddie, she halted and swung the rifle on him.

"I don't know why I don't kill you," she said bitterly. "Get out of my sight."

Eddie took a step forward. "Barbie!"

"Get out!" she cried.

AFTER THE HONEYMOON

By Limerick Luke

A plain-living cowboy called Mac
Built what seemed to him a big shack,
Then, like other grooms,
Had to add on two rooms
To hold all his bride's bric-a-brac!

Eddie shrugged. He took down his jumper from a peg and went out. Beyond her range of vision, he ducked around a corner of the barn and waited. From the direction of the main street he heard the excited babble. It was near starting time, and tension was mounting. Red's death had altered the betting considerably. Barbie's appearance with the Knowlton stagecoach would probably change nothing. Eddie knew Sheriff Garst and his deputy would have their hands full keeping the mob under control.

Inside the stable, a whip cracked. Eddie peered around the corner and watched the stage move out. He let it pass, then sprinted after it. He climbed through the door and closed it gently, just as Barbie swung onto the street. A whoop went up from the crowd. Inside the coach, Eddie dived to the floor and listened to the shouts.

"Beat 'em, Barbie."

"Don't let 'em crowd you on the pass."

"I'm betting on the girl, but not as a driver." There was laughter after that one.

A practical man said, "She's pretty, but she can't last up there two and a half, maybe three hours."

"Fifteen miles there, fifteen back."

"She's Sam's only chance. He's sick abed."

The coach rocked and swayed as Barbie maneuvered into the starting line. Eddie flattened himself, trying to be invisible to the men atop the other coaches, as well as the cheering spectators who lined every rooftop.

The coach halted. The clamor quieted slightly. Garst shouted instructions and read the government's rules about fair play. Atop the next coach, a man laughed. A cheer rang along the street, then died away.

For an instant the town was silent. Then Garst's gun roared. The coach lunged ahead and the town exploded with sound. Men yelled. Guns boomed. Whipshots slashed through the uproar. The floor bounced up at Eddie's face. He braced his body against the pitching roll of the coach.

Abruptly, the wild commotion faded away behind. Eddie waited a minute, then another, before he risked a look. At first it was difficult to tell who was leading. The coaches were fanned wide, as drivers refused to choke themselves or their horses with the leader's dust. But Barbie was running well. And already the towering peaks to the west loomed closer.

Then, as Eddie watched, the coaches began to close up. He realized with a start that they were jockeying for position at the pass. Less than a mile west of town the stage road ran between the river on the south and a flinty ridge on the north. There was passage for only one coach at a time along that quarter mile. Whoever got there first commanded a substantial lead.

Up on the box, Barbie's whip cracked again and again. Eddie backed against a window and eased his slender shoulders through. He reached out, gripped the baggage rack, and hauled himself up. Crouching against the wild lurch of the coach, he crept forward. He dropped onto the seat, and Barbie cried out in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Eddie got a hand on the whip, jerked it from her grasp, and threw it overboard. "Red never used a whip," he said.

Almost cat-like, Barbie uttered a scream of rage, and swung a clawing hand. Eddie rocked back. He grinned, and that fanned her fury. Forgetting the race, she dropped the reins and fumbled for the gun in her belt. Eddie lunged against her and seized her wrist. She fought back with surprising strength.

It took him a full minute to wrestle the gun from her. He dropped it into the boot and, sticking two fingers in his mouth, whistled shrilly. As the horses slowed, he kicked the brake. The coach came to a rocking halt. Barbie turned on him, her rage crowding sanity. He clapped a hand over her mouth and held her.

"I've ridden with Red a lot," he said, "but I don't know how to handle a team. Do you?"

She nodded. Watching her, he jumped down and grabbed for the ribbons. He climbed back up, sorting them, and handed them to her.

"They're all yours," he said.

"That's nice of you," she said tightly, "now that we're already beaten." Fight drained away and she slumped back against the box.

Eddie glanced ahead. The other three coaches were pounding through the pass.

"You said you could drive," he said angrily. "Now do it."

He braced himself and yelled, "Hi-yi." The coach lurched, swayed, shot forward. He yelled, "Hi, Nellie, you bag of bones, show me your heels. That's your leader," he shouted to Barbie. "You have to talk to her special. No cussing. Watch your far-wheeler for soldiering."

The horses settled into a steady, ground-consuming stride. Eddie turned to Barbie and found a faint smile beginning at the corners of her eyes.

"Red never used a whip," he told her, "but he could talk his teams into anything. Hey, Sarah," he shouted then, "stop dragging your feet. This is no picnic."

"They didn't run like that for me," Barbie said.

Eddie grinned. "Red would never treat any animal rough he told me. He picked his horses from wild stock and Injun-gentled 'em. You probably scared 'em with your whip."

"I think it works," Barbie said excitedly. "We're gaining. I hope your voice holds out."

THEY were gaining slowly—but too slowly. As the minutes ran out, as the miles rolled beneath the pounding horses and the big wheels, the ground they had lost going toward the pass loomed bigger and bigger. Still they thundered nearer the peaks.

Then suddenly they topped a gentle rise and Monte Vista lay before them, nestled against the timbered foothills. Eddie yelled at the horses, and the stage raced down the slope. But the three other coaches were already outbound, their drivers whooping derisively, when Barbie swung the Knowlton stage into the town.

Here, too, spectators lined walks and rooftops, and cheers followed the coach up the street. But there was no hysteria in the sound. Folks were applauding a game loser. Some people turned away, not waiting for the coach to leave, as Barbie reined up at the stables.

She jumped down beside Eddie to help the hostlers change horses. Oblivious to the now impatient crowd, Eddie took a minute making sure he knew the names of the new horses. Then he grabbed a canteen and leaped up, and they were off again.

It might have been a stronger team, or Eddie's increasing hoarseness might have sounded more like Red's voice. At any rate, the Knowlton stage began to close with the other coaches, halfway back from Monte Vista. Eddie felt his first alarm when the last of McCoy's coach's made no effort to prevent their passing. They were running abreast of the second coach a quarter of a mile later.

"Look!" Barbie cried suddenly.

The second stage had pulled close. A man, crouched on the top, swung a rope with a hook arrangement at the end. Before Eddie could figure the maneuver, the hook was thrown. It caught on the luggage rail at the top rear of the Knowlton coach. Then the driver on the other box snapped his whip over his team. Frantically, the horses strained. The coach pulled ahead.

Without looking back, Barbie shouted, "What are they doing?"

The other coach pulled away, and Eddie saw that the end of the rope was secured low at the rear. "They're trying to wreck us," he yelled. "They'll get a lead on us, then make a square turn and pull us over. If the coach doesn't roll on us, they'll beat us to death, and it'll still look like an accident. There'll be nobody to contest the winner."

"Can you get the hook off?"

"I've got to."

He pulled a knife from his pocket, opened out a blade, and crawled back. A bullet sang past his ear. He flattened, muttering a curse. He'd forgotten the third coach, the trailing one.

"Get down," he shouted to Barbie.

Damn McCoy and his thoroughness, Eddie thought. He had planned everything so he could win. He had one coach as a winner, one as a wrecker, the third to carry a gunslinger to keep Eddie occupied. As usual, McCoy stacked the cards in his favor.

Barbie hunched up on the boot. Eddie inched along the swaying top toward the rope. A slug slammed into the back of the coach, then another. Eddie looked back and

recognized Yeager. He glanced ahead and saw that the second coach was almost far enough in the lead for its turn.

"Shall I turn with them?" Barbie called. "At least we wouldn't wreck."

"No," he yelled. "We'd never catch the first one."

He flattened again and inched back. A slug ripped into the roof a foot from his face. Yeager wasn't fooling. Eddie glanced back again. Yeager was crouched on the box just like the man who killed Red had done, and held his gun out at chin level just like the gunman had. Of course, it was Yeager!

Eddie tossed the knife to his left hand and brought out his gun. He swiveled to a sitting position. Yeager's gun flamed twice. One slug bit into the coach's top, the other creased the collar of Eddie's jumper. He swung his gun up, squeezed the trigger, then squeezed again and again. He was close enough to see Yeager's face go white, then contort with pain.

Barbie's scream brought Eddie around. The coach ahead rocked into a hard turn. Eddie stabbed at the rope. It tightened with a singing sound. Awkwardly he flailed, left-handed. The coach jerked and leaned over, and the rope snapped.

Holstering his gun, closing the knife, Eddie slid back onto the seat. "I just got the man who killed Red," he said.

Barbie stiffened, but didn't take her gaze off the road. "What happened last night?"

He told her all of it. When he was finished, tears glistened in her eyes. They were closing with the first coach. Abruptly the coach swung in front of them.

"Pull way to the left," Eddie yelled. The dust burned in his raw throat and he wondered how many more yells were left in him. Then they pulled clear. "Hey, you, Bessie," he croaked. "Shake out your tail."

"Please, please," Barbie said, her words a prayer. "Please."

EDDIE grinned, and glanced at her. For the first time he noticed her hands. They were bleeding where the heavy reins had worn through the skin. "Keep wide to the left," he cautioned once more. "If they get in front again we'll never pass 'em."

Barbie eased left a bit and Eddie set up his chant. The flinty ridge loomed up less than a half mile ahead. The coach that made the pass first would win the race. Eddie sipped from the canteen. It helped a little. He renewed his shouting, and they gained. Closer, closer—a quarter of a mile. Now their leader was even with the back wheels of the other coach. The man riding shotgun on McCoy's coach turned and looked back. It was McCoy himself.

How much longer, Eddie wondered, could he keep it up? He felt as though he'd swallowed hot coals. Then he remembered Barbie's hands. He cleared his throat, tasting blood, and whooped it up once again. The Knowlton stage moved ahead.

The leaders of both teams ran even now, the pounding hoofs an earth-shaking thunder. On they ran. The pass leaped at them from the narrowing road.

Suddenly McCoy leaped up, a blazing six-gun in his hand. Dust spurted ahead of Barbie's leader. Eddie braced, and his gun flicked up. He snapped a shot. McCoy's hat darted from his head. Cursing wildly, McCoy grabbed the whip from his driver and flogged his team.

Eddie sheathed his gun. Now was the time. He had been saving Red's favorite yell.

"Eeeeee-yiiiii!" he screamed. "Injuns on the warpath! Run like hell for home!" He gasped for breath. "Eeeeee-yiiiii!"

The horses seemed to hesitate an instant in mid-stride. Then, as one, they surged into the harness. The big Concord plunged ahead.

McCoy shouted and grabbed for the reins. He and the driver hauled back too late. Already the outside wheels were slipping off the road. The coach swayed dizzily, the tongue cracked like a rifle shot. The horses, broken loose, fought for footing on the steep slope. For a moment the coach rode steadily. Then flipped end over end toward the river below.

Through the pass, Barbie eased the horses back to a comfortable lope. She leaned across, found Eddie's cheek, and kissed him. He put an arm around her and let the wind blow the fight and the hurt and the anger out of him. There were many things he wanted to tell her, but his voice was gone. She smiled and nodded.

"So this is your Cinderella?" Daphne's scornful voice said.

THERE'S ALWAYS A CHANCE

By ROE RICHMOND

• • •

NELL KNEW Lynn's people had killed her father . . . but she'd forgive him, if he kept his promise to take her out of this drab nester life

THE girl waited in the woods of a bluff above the Talisman River. It was already dark under the trees, but twilight lingered thin and gray on the plains of Berendon Basin and made a sheen on the water.

Nell Crain had waited here many times for the same man, but never in the way she was waiting tonight. Autumn edged the air and set her shivering. Her hand tightened on the old Spencer carbine that had been her father's.

Lynn Ormsbee had not come the last two nights, and there was small reason to expect him on this third evening. She almost hoped he wouldn't show, because if he did she was going to shoot him. Three homestead men had been killed in the past year. Her father, Charley Crain, had been the last one.

As time went on Nell became convinced that the big ranchers, the Ormsbees and the Millers, were behind the killings. She saw a reflection of guilt in the changed manner of young Lynn Ormsbee. Now that he was trying to break with her, Nell had decided to shoot him.

The wildness of the girl was apparent even in repose. Worn blue jeans and a faded cotton shirt failed to conceal the rich curves of her body, as she leaned upon a boulder. Reddish bronze hair, cut short into tousled waves, framed her face. She had eyes that changed from gray to green to blue, a straight nose, and a wide mouth.

Nell Crain could have had almost any young nester, cowhand or townsman in the Basin, but her heart was set on Lynn Ormsbee, although he came from another world. Since her father's death, Nell felt like a traitor to to her own people, but her love for Lynn was stronger than her loyalty to the homesteaders.

Now she had resolved to free herself from that bondage with a bullet—even if it broke her own heart. No man, not even Lynn Ormsbee, could treat her this way, throw her aside like a squaw, cast her off like a dancehall doxie.

Watching so intently for Lynn, she did not hear the cautious movements in the background, until the slow familiar voice of Dan Rawlins sounded close behind her. "Lay that rifle down, Nell. I got you covered."

He laughed in soft amusement, and Nell Crain whirled with fury, her eyes blazing and her teeth shining white in her tanned face.

"You could get yourself shot skulking round like that! What's the idea, Dan? You know I don't like to be spied on."

Dan Rawlins, a neighbor of the Crains since childhood, lounged on a nearby rock and shook his sandy head, smiling down at her. "Picture of a young lady waiting for the man she loves," he drawled. "You're too grown up to play games like this, Nell. You'd never take a shot at him anyway."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she declared. "Get along home and leave me alone. You have no right to follow me out here."

"I saw the look on your face when you rode out, Nell. I saw the carbine on the saddle. I figured you'd been stood up so much you were ready to do something foolish."

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"It's my business to keep a neighbor out of shooting scrapes."

Nell Crain laughed scornfully. "Three of your neighbors were shot down almost under your nose. And what've you done about it?"

"I'm still working on it," Dan Rawlins said gravely. "It takes time, Nell."

"Why should it take time? We know who did it, don't we? The Ormsbees and the Millers."

"It's not that simple. And I'm not so sure they did it."

"They hate us," the girl said bitterly. "They don't want us on the range. Of course they did it, Dan."

"One man did it—alone," Dan Rawlins said. "If they'd done it, there would've been a bunch of 'em, and a lot of bullets to spread the blame. It was one man and one shot, every time."

"Well, they hired it done, then."

"That's what I mean, Nell. But you have to find out things for sure before you start after people with a gun. This was bound to come, Nell. It would've started sooner if Sheriff Slocumb hadn't sided us."

Nell Crain laughed harshly. "And for that, Sloke'll never get elected again."

"I reckon not," Dan Rawlins drawled. "Or maybe they've threatened him off now. Maybe he won't be siding us any more."

"In that case, we'll have to move out," Nell Crain said. "Move out, or die here."

"Come on, Nell, let's ride home," Dan suggested gently. "Lynn won't be coming tonight, or any other night—now."

"What do you mean?" she flared, angry again.

"Daphne Miller's back on the Diamond M. She finished school in the East last spring and went to Europe this summer. Now she's home."

"So that's it."

Nell Crain pushed away from the boulder, her hands white knuckled on the carbine. In that moment Dan knew she would have shot Lynn Ormsbee without hesitation.

LOOKING down at her, his square face and mild eyes were full of sympathy. Dan Rawlins was broad and solid, calm and sincere, his rugged features homely and pleasant, his smile shy and thoroughly winning. He put a brotherly arm out and drew her to him, and Nell Crain hid her face against his strong shoulder.

She was vibrant and alive in his loose embrace, and Dan's feelings were not altogether brotherly as he tried to comfort her. There was desire in him, deep and urgent, but he strove to keep it under control. The carbine dropped into the grass at their feet.

The girl, nestling close in her pain and desolation, was suddenly and warmly grateful for his reassuring presence. She lifted her face to his, her eyes softening from green to gray in the dimness, her lips full and ripe.

Dan Rawlins tried to look away, but he couldn't. Slowly he bent until his mouth was on hers. He tried to keep the kiss cool and restrained, but his arms tightened, his mouth crushed hers, and everything else was lost in a floodtide of emotion.

"No, no," he murmured, raising his tawny head and holding her away. "Not like this. Not when you're still thinking of him."

Nell Crain hid her face on his broad chest. "I'm sorry, Dan. You deserve better, a whole lot better. I'll never be good enough for you."

He said nothing for a time, breathing in her fragrance, brushing his lips across the bright cropped curls of her head. Then he held her at arms' length and smiled.

"Let's ride, Nell."

"Why are you so sure Lynn won't come tonight? Just Daphne?"

"The cattlemen are having their fall roundup dance in town," Dan Rawlins told her.

"Oh, yes." Her voice was small and flat. "Of course. He'll be there, with her."

Breaking away, she picked up the Spencer and walked through the trees toward her horse. Dan Rawlins moved after her, with a hollow ache inside, his throat so tight it hurt. Nell Crain had always been the only girl in the world for him.

Their horses were together at the rim of the bluff. Mounting, they slanted down the slope and rode south in Berendon Basin toward the scattered lights of the homesteads along the Talisman. The smell of earth and grass, sage and sand, came on the breeze.

It was full night now, the moon a golden horn above the peaks of the Pinals, the heavens starred from that horizon to the Sawtooth Range. Farther south the lamps of War Bonnet made a luminous glow in the sky.

"The ranchers have so much," Nell Crain mused, "and we have so little. And they don't even want us to have that. Don't you get tired, Dan, of slaving and scrimping and going without things?"

"Sure I do, Nell."

"If there were anything to look forward to, any hope ahead, people could stand it. But this way, I don't know."

"There's always hope," Dan Rawlins said. "That's what most folks live on."

"But it's empty hope, Dan—for the ones like us. We can't get out of the rut, any more than my father did. He worked like a dog all his life, and what did he get out of it?"

"He lived, Nell; he enjoyed life. He had your mother and you. He liked farming, and he had friends along the river. Charley Crain was a good man, Nell. He was like a father to me, after my dad died."

"But a failure, Dan?" It was only a half question.

"Who can say? Not if he had a good full life life, being his own man, doing what he wanted."

Nell Crain gestured impatiently. "You've given up, Dan. You know there's no way out, so you try to make the best of it."

"Was Lynn Ormsbee going to be your way out, Nell?"

"I suppose so, in a sense." She sighed. "A girl likes nice things—comfort, security, pretty clothes. Even a wild one like me, Dan."

"Remember Tyle Herrick?" asked Dan, thoughtfully. "He found his way out. He was a nester kid like us, but tougher. He wouldn't hold still for anything or anybody. Sometimes I envy Tyle."

"An outlaw!" she said, disgustedly. "A crazy killer, Dan. He never got out of anything. He just got in deeper and deeper."

"He's still riding free," Dan Rawlins said. "They busted his gang, but they never got Tyle Herrick. I heard he was riding back this way, but I guess he never got here."

"Free?" scoffed Nell Crain. "With five thousand dollars reward on his head, and every man's hand against him—you call that being free? He can't sleep nights, or sit down with his back to a door, or trust anybody in the world."

"Well, I wouldn't like it much," Dan admitted. "But Tyle was always a fighter, stack-

ing himself against the world, fighting and hating."

"You were good friends, weren't you?"

"The best." Dan grinned, remembering. "We had some wild times together, Nell. Tyle had an old Paterson Colt, a .36, that he was always practicing with, drawing and shooting at marks. He was good, too, even as a kid. He had a lot of guts. You have to hand it to old Tyle."

"Sure, I know," said Nell. "I used to cheer every time he robbed some rich bank, or rustled cattle off some big ranch. But what'll it get him, Dan? Nothing but an early grave."

"If he were back here," Dan murmured, "he could be the gunhand Ormsbee and Miller hired to do their killing."

"He wouldn't turn on the people he grew up with, would he?"

"I don't know, Nell. Once I wouldn't have figured so. But after so much killing, maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe he just doesn't care."

"But they'd turn him in for the reward money," Nell said.

"After they got through using him—if they dared to. Although they don't need five thousand dollars as much as we do, Nell. But some of 'em never get enough, I guess."

"Dan, I don't feel like going home," Nell Crain said abruptly. "Let's ride somewhere else."

Dan Rawlins smiled at her. "Well, we might drift into town and look in at the dance, providing you don't start shooting up the place, Nell."

THE Cattlemen's Ball, held after fall roundup, was the social event of the season in Berendon Basin. The large dining room of the Plaza Hotel in War Bonnet, cleared of tables and chairs and with its hardwood floor waxed and polished, was the scene of the affair. It was attended by all the ranchers and their families, prominent merchants, business and professional men, and a few selected tophands and foremen.

The only homesteader ever known to crash the exclusive function had been Tyle Herrick, fresh from his first two gun fights and shortly before embarking on his gaudy career of crime. Young Lynn Ormsbee, infuriated by Tyle's presumption in dancing with Daphne Miller, wanted to have Herrick thrown out, but old Leland Ormsbee prevailed upon him to keep the peace, at least until the kid gunfighter made himself obnoxious.

Tyle Herrick had apparently been satisfied merely to gain entrance and to tread the hallowed floor with the beautiful Daphne Miller, for he departed soon after that number, without creating any disturbance, to seek the livelier atmosphere of the Caballero Saloon.

Before the night was over, however, Tyle Herrick had shot and killed his third man, a Diamond M rider who took offense at his slurring reference to the Miller girl. Tyle had left War Bonnet on the run, slightly ahead of Sheriff Slocumb's rather reluctant posse. That was the last the Basin saw of Tyle Herrick, although the home folks heard a great deal about him through the following years, during which the Herrick gang was terrorizing the West.

A second-floor gallery overlooked one end of the spacious ballroom in the hotel, and from here the uninvited were permitted to gaze upon the gala activity below and to listen to the music of an orchestra imported from St. Louis. Dan Rawlins and Nell Crain, after racking their horses in the back yard, passed through the crowded lobby and climbed to the second floor, somewhat painfully conscious of their poor and dusty clothing.

The balcony was crammed with a motley gathering, with whom they should have felt more at home, but somehow did not. Dan Rawlins resented the humble envious attitude of these spectators, and wished he had never suggested this visit.

In the audience were townspeople and homesteaders, half-drunk cowboys and painted dancehall girls, and the usual nondescripts seen at all free entertainments. Dan didn't care to be identified with these onlookers, any more than he wanted to join the dressed-up revelers below.

Nell Crain's eyes, burning green and cold now, soon picked out the tall figure of Lynn Ormsbee, his dark head bent over the golden one of Daphne Miller as they waltzed. Elegant in his well-tailored suit, Lynn was the picture of poise and grace, a young man born to domineer and rule.

Daphne Miller, in a black gown trimmed with gold that matched her hair, was a lovely creature with a haughty manner that equalled Lynn's. Watching them and knowing they belonged together, Nell Crain was consumed with jealousy and hatred.

She glanced down at the holstered Colt thonged to the leg of a nearby rider. Dan caught her look and said, grinning, "No fair shooting ducks in a pond, Nell. Guess we should've stayed home."

"Don't let them get you down, Dan." She waved disparagingly at the colorful dance floor. "We're as good as any of them."

"Better," Dan said casually. "They don't bother me. I wouldn't swap places with any of 'em."

"Neither would I," Nell declared, but she didn't mean it the way he did.

"Excuse me a minute; I'll go down to the bar," Dan said. "I can't take much pleasure in this cold sober."

Nell nodded with an absent smile, her stare still fixed on Lynn Ormsbee. Dan moved toward the stairway.

When the waltz ended, Nell Crain left the gallery and drifted aimlessly toward the end of the corridor, passing the rooms opened up to serve as ladies' cloak rooms and lounge parlors. She hated her frayed blue jeans and thin bleached shirt, quite unaware that she cut a striking figure, even in that outfit, moving with easy grace and her head held high.

At the end of the hall she leaned on a scarred windowsill and gazed out into the night. A man lounged in the shadows next door, near a store closed for the evening. There was something familiar about his rangy form, the thrust of his head on his powerful shoulders. When he stirred it was with the ease of a mountain cat. Nell studied the man, a coldness growing inside her.

He wore a gun belt with two low-slung holsters tied down on his thighs, and the equipment seemed a part of him. In profile, beneath the rakish hat, she saw a hawk nose and a jutting jaw. It looked like Tyle Herrick, she realized with astonishment. But it couldn't be Tyle, exposing himself so carelessly and openly in his old home town—not with that price on his head.

Still, the resemblance was marked, and a chilling shock went through her, a sudden fear for Dan Rawlins. The presence of Tyle Herrick—if it were he—meant death for someone, as certainly as the presence of vultures did. And Dan might be the next victim on that list the ranchers were rumored to have.

NELL CRAIN heard a man's footsteps in the hallway and turned eagerly, but it wasn't Dan Rawlins coming. It was Lynn Ormsbee, tall and darkly handsome, with that gay swagger and the smile that pierced her like a knife. Her heart leaped violently, and then sank swiftly into cold rock-bottom depths. She would have fled, if there'd been any place to go, but she was trapped in the dead end of the corridor.

"Nell, I want to explain about the last few nights," Lynn said.

"There's no need," she protested desperately. "I don't want to hear it. Just go away and leave me alone, Lynn."

"But you've got to listen."

He was close to her now, and Nell felt her legs tremble with weakness, her heart hammer again in wild excitement. It was like being under a spell. If he touched her she was done for; if he put his arms around her she was lost. She despised herself for her weakness.

"No, it's all over," she said. "If there ever was anything, it's gone. Go back to your girl, Lynn."

"That's the family's doing, not mine," Ormsbee insisted. "I don't want Daphne, I want you. She's all right; she's a nice girl. But compared to you, Nell, she's nothing, less than nothing. Please believe me."

"No," Nell said flatly. "You've got your girl. Let me alone."

Closing in, Lynn Ormsbee caught her in his arms, held her in spite of her frantic struggles, and clamped his mouth upon hers. Everything in Nell Crain seemed to melt, dissolve, and swirl into molten fire, but for the first time in her life she went on fighting against him and the strange power he had over her. Lynn's grasp became cruel, his lips even more demanding, but Nell remained rigidly unresponsive.

High-heeled slippers clicked along the hall,

and Daphne Miller's scornful voice lashed at them: "So this is your Cinderella? A charming picture, indeed! Why don't you take her down to dance? She's all dressed up for it, I see."

Lynn Ormsbee released Nell and wheeled on the other girl. "Go back to the parlor, Daphne. I'll join you in a minute."

"That's hardly time enough, is it?" she mocked. "Couldn't you do better in a more private spot, Lynn?" Daphne looked at Nell and her nostrils quivered, her petulant mouth curled in disdain.

Nell Crain laughed at her with mild contempt. "Take him with you. I don't want him."

"Not much!" jeered Daphne.

"Run along now. I mean it," Ormsbee ordered harshly.

Daphne Miller laughed, tossed her blonde head, and flounced away down the corridor. Ormsbee turned back to Nell, gripping her arms in steel fingers. He was strong and quick-tempered, a fighter despite his sheltered heritage, and his intense eyes were full of fire now.

"Watch how you poke fun at Texas, pardner."

"Listen, Nell. You have to listen."

"Don't waste your breath, Lynn," she interrupted. "Go along with your little Dresden china doll."

Clutching her roughly to him, Lynn Ormsbee was trying to kiss her again when Dan Rawlins reached them and laid one great hand on Ormsbee's immaculate shoulder, jerking

him loose and spinning him about. Ormsbee wrenched free, snarling and swinging his fists in fury. Dan Rawlins took two blows in the face, ducked in under another, then drove his shoulder into the rancher's son, slamming him back into the wall with jarring force.

Dan's left elbow smashed Ormsbee's mouth, rocking his glossy head against the boards, and Dan's right fist sledged wickedly into his waistline. Ormsbee gasped and groaned, doubling and retching in agony.

Dan brought his left ripping up to straighten and stiffen Ormsbee, lifting him momentarily a foot taller. Lynn fell back stunned and half senseless upon the wall, blood pouring from his mouth and nose. Dan stood off, balanced and watchful, while Ormsbee hung there helpless and sobbing for breath.

"Kill you—for this," panted Lynn Ormsbee, blowing a scarlet spray from his mashed lips. "I'd kill you—right here—if I had a gun."

"Go get one," Dan said calmly. "I won't run away."

"No, no, Dan," cried Nell Crain. "This has gone far enough."

Ormsbee held a handkerchief to his face and mumbled, "I'll get a gun, don't worry. You'll die tonight, nester."

"Get it, then," Dan Rawlins told him. "I'll wait for you in the lobby, Lynn."

"You can't, Dan, you can't!" Nell said. "He'll bring half of Double O with him."

Lynn Ormsbee lowered the bloody handkerchief and stared at the girl. "Is that what you really think of me, Nell?" He shook his head, and more red drops spattered his white shirt front. "I'll come alone, Dan. I won't need any help."

"I'll be waiting," Dan said. They watched Ormsbee walk away, holding the handkerchief to his mouth and weaving a trifle. Dan smiled shyly and touched the lump on his own cheekbone. "I wasn't going to horn in, Nell, till I saw you were trying to fight him off."

"Yes, I had sense enough to do that, for once," she murmured. "Dan, come home with me. You can't fight him with a gun. You haven't even got one."

"I can borrow one."

"But he's good. He's an expert."

"How do you know I'm not?" asked Dan. "I used to practice with Tyle, remember?"

"I thought I saw Tyle tonight, Dan," Nell said quickly, motioning to the window as the memory came back to her. "Down there in front of O'Brien's store. He was just standing there, watching and waiting."

"You did?" Dan said sharply, looking out the window and shaking his head. "Funny, I was talking to Slocumb downstairs. He acted real worried. I guess he's been getting some warnings. He had a hunch Tyle Herrick was back here in the basin, hiring out his guns."

Nell Crain shuddered. "Let's get out of here, Dan."

"You go, Nell. I can't run out on Lynn. You know that."

"I won't go without you. I'll get Sloke to stop the fight."

"It would take more'n a sheriff to stop Ormsbee," said Dan, shaking his sandy head.

THEY walked slowly along the corridor toward the head of the stairs, with Nell clinging to Dan's arm. Somewhere out in the night a gunshot sounded. It was probably some drunken cowhand shooting at the moon—unless Tyle Herrick *was* back, and working. Nell's fingers bit into Dan's arm as she looked up at his brown face.

"Dan, I'm seeing straight and clear for the first time. Maybe you've been so close to me I couldn't really see you until tonight."

"Well, I'm not very pretty, Nell," he drawled.

"You look mighty pretty to me, Mr. Rawlins," she said gravely. "You're the best looking—and the best—man in the world."

"Now, Nell," he chided gently. "That's laying it on too thick."

"Kiss me, Dan," said Nell Crain.

He did, and this time there was no shadow between them, the girl was no longer thinking of somebody else. This time there were just the two of them, welded into one by their lips and arms. They went on, laughing softly together, thrilling to the sweetness and wonder of it—a boy and girl who had grown up side by side, but had only discovered one another this night.

As they descended into the thronged lobby, a man burst in the front door, shouting hoarsely, "Sheriff Slocumb's dead, down by the livery barn! They say Tyle Herrick did it.

One shot, right through the heart."

Dan Rawlins and Nell halted, frozen in their tracks by the news. Poor old Sloke! The last friend of authority and influence the nesters had had was gone now. The homestead families would be completely at the mercy of the big ranchers. The next sheriff was bound to be nothing but a tool in the hands of the cattlemen.

Everyone started rushing for the door then, as the spell broke. Dan thrust Nell into the tide of humanity, standing clear himself and calling, "You ride for home, Nell. I'll catch up with you." She shook her cropped head and tried to wriggle out of the pack, but the pressure of bodies held her and forced her on toward the doorway.

Dan Rawlins still needed a gun, but no longer for Lynn Ormsbee. Now it was for the best friend of his boyhood, Tyle Herrick, turned killer. It was obvious now that Tyle was the hired gunman who had shot Charley Crain and the other two homesteaders in the past year.

Dan turned toward the rear of the house, forgetting all about Ormsbee, bent on playing out a sudden hunch. The livery was on the same side of the street as the Plaza. Tyle Herrick would have a horse staked out back somewhere, saddled and ready for the getaway, and it would be simple for him, with all the people in town swarming the main street and crowding around the stable yard where Slocumb lay dead in the dirt. But if Dan Rawlins got out there fast enough he had a chance to cut Tyle off—and a chance of getting himself killed in the bargain.

He rammed through the kitchen, out the back door, and off the rear porch to the hitch rack where they had tied their horses. Yanking the Spencer out of Nell's saddleboot, Dan whirled into the continuous areaway that ran behind the main street buildings toward the livery barn.

It was dark and littered with rubbish. Dan sloughed through ash piles and stumbled over tin cans, bottles and broken boxes, dodged rain barrels and woodsheds, and ducked under clotheslines. Then, hearing hoofbeats in the next back street, he turned into an alley and raced through it in time to glimpse a fleeing horseman. It had to be Tyle Herrick.

Dan swung the carbine and fired, not aiming at the rider, and the horse went down in a long plunging fall, threshing up dust in the moonlight. But the man rolled clear, scrambling into the shelter of a crude shed.

Flame speared back at Dan. Splinters stung his cheek as he pulled back into the alley, sweating and shaken by the pounding of his heart. He had hoped the fall would knock Tyle out, but no such luck. He would have to do it the hard way now. At this range the Spencer gave him a slight—and much needed—advantage. The time element was in his favor, too. But Tyle was a professional, one of the best.

"Pull out, friend, if you want to stay alive," a voice called from the shed corner. Dan knew it was Herrick.

"It's Dan Rawlins, Tyle," he yelled back. "You're all done, boy."

Tyle Herrick laughed with lilting mockery, the merry reckless laugh that Dan remembered as well as he remembered the clear deep voice. "You haven't a chance, Danny. Go back while you can. I don't want to kill you."

"I'm staying, Tyle. You can't make it without a horse. Throw out your guns. Let me take you before the mob gets here."

"Nobody takes me, Dan. You ought to know that. Do you want to step out in the open here?"

"I have time; I can wait," Dan said. "But you can't, Tyle."

"So I won't wait, farmer," Tyle Herrick said. "See you later."

DAN RAWLINS heard the crunch of running boots, waited a moment, then walked out into the road to take after the gunman. For some reason he wanted to keep Tyle—dead or alive—away from the mob that would be coming out from the center of town. He was in midstreet when Tyle Herrick slid from the shadows beyond the shed, some fifty yards away, and Dan knew he had been tricked.

"You were next on the list anyway, Dan," said Tyle Herrick, and lifted his gun.

Dan hit the dirt in a long flat dive, a split second before Tyle's pistol blazed in his direction. Firing the Spencer from the ground, Dan saw Herrick shudder and buckle from the im-

pact of the .50 slug. Rolling over and lining the carbine, after jacking in a fresh shell, Dan squeezed off another shot. Dust spurted from Tyle's brush jacket, as the bullet threw him back against a cottonwood tree.

Hunched there upon the trunk, Tyle worked both guns with incredible speed. But his shots were slashing up streamers of dirt halfway between them. On his feet in a crouch now, Dan Rawlins levered and aimed and triggered once more, and Tyle Herrick spun away from the tree, took three stilted strides, and pitched full length into the ditch, with dust clouding up about him. Dan moved warily forward, the carbine ready, but Tyle was all through fighting.

He was still alive, though, when Dan got there, his strange cat's eyes shining, his mouth drawn into a perpetual sneer by the scar on his cheek. "Had to come—sometime, Danny," he said, slowly and distinctly. "Never figured —you'd be the one. But no matter. My string just—ran out."

"Who was paying you, Tyle?"

"You don't know? Maybe you can guess." Tyle Herrick shivered, writhed spasmodically, stiffened into stillness, then went limp in the gravel. He was still breathing, but not for long.

When Dan Rawlins straightened up, the Spencer hanging loosely in his hand, an awed crowd was already gathering around him and the dead outlaw in the ditch. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and pat him on the back, but Dan shrank from the contacts. It wasn't until somebody mentioned it that he thought of the five-thousand-dollars reward, and what it would mean to his family and the Crains.

Dan got away as soon as possible, a crew of well-meaning hero worshippers tagging at his heels, and found Nell waiting in front of the hotel with their horses. She already knew what had happened. They mounted silently and rode out of War Bonnet, north along the Talisman toward the homestead farms.

"Maybe Lynn won't be so anxious to fight you now, Dan," said Nell, a mile out of town.

"Hope not."

"You're the one for me. You've always been the one," Nell murmured. "But I didn't know enough to know it, until now."

Dan Rawlins tried to joke, to hide his true feelings. "It's just my money you're after, woman."

Nell Crain smiled. "Well, it's enough to get married on, Dan. You were right. There's always hope, always a chance. They're talking in town about running you for sheriff.

"It's out of my line, Nell," he said slowly, "but I might take it, just to help our people and keep those cattlemen in order. Maybe old Sloke'd like it that way, too."

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"Johnny!" Susanna called sharply. "Rise and shine!"

FIDDLEFOOT FIGHTING MAN

By J. L. BOUMA

AT TWILIGHT Johnny Dubin topped the rise and looked down on a log farmhouse surrounded by plowed fields. A lamp burned in the house, and the flickering glow of a fire showed behind the barn. The steady sound of an ax biting into wood came on the spring breeze. Johnny took off his hat and ran his fingers through his long black hair, and he straightened his buckskin-clad shoulders and sighed, the view was that pleasing.

Johnny Dubin, this is the homey kind of place you've been wanting, he told himself. You can keep traveling from now until doomsday and never find as pretty a little valley as the one you're looking at right now. It's time you settled down and planted your roots, Johnny, and the land here seems mighty eager for the plow.

He meant every word. A man could fiddlefoot and fool himself for just so long. It was one thing to travel and enjoy the country,

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IT WASN'T HARD for Johnny to win Susanna's love . . . but trying to make a good impression on her mother was backbreaking work

but when a man reached the age of twenty-five it was time he thought of building a home for himself.

That's all there is to it, Johnny, he admonished himself. You'd best talk to the folks down below and get the lay of the land. Then you can pick yourself out a nice quarter section and file, and a couple of years from now you'll be able to stand on this very spot and look down on your own farm.

He looked for a likely site as he rode down into the valley. A stream meandered through the meadows past stands of poplar and pine. The slopes in the distance were black with timber. A man would make no mistake in settling here.

Johnny splashed across the stream and rode toward the farm buildings, and the steady sound of the ax grew louder. So did the snappish voice that accompanied each blow.

"Light into it, Elmore! Hit 'er another lick! Put your shoulders into it, man!" It was a woman's voice, and a bossy one at that.

Johnny stopped at the corner of the barn and leaned his elbows on his saddlehorn. In the flickering firelight he saw a man chopping at the roots of a giant stump. He was a big man, as big as Johnny himself, but heftier through the body. His sweat-soaked hickory shirt stretched taut across his broad back at every stroke. Now and again he stopped to toss chunks of gnarled roots in the flames.

"Get at 'er, Elmore," the woman snapped, "or you'll be all night grubbing 'er out!" She darted around the stump like a bossy hen, a small woman with a sharp face and hair like an abandoned nest.

Elmore put a hand against his back. "I'm fair tired, Mrs. Bliss. Can't we finish this in the morning?"

"There's no rest for the wicked," said Mrs. Bliss grimly, "so get at 'er, Elmore. Chop through a few more of those roots and you can hitch Elsie up and pull out the stump."

Elmore groaned. At that moment a figure came from the house and stopped in the flickering circle of light.

"Ma," a low and throaty voice said, "supper's on the table."

"I can't worry about that, Susanna," said Mrs. Bliss. "I told your father that he doesn't get a scrap of food until he clears that stump out of my yard. Hit 'er, Elmore! Don't be pampering yourself!"

Johnny scarcely heard. He straightened slowly as he stared at Susanna. He'd traveled from Tennessee to Oregon in a roundabout way, and so had covered a lot of country and seen a lot of girls, but he'd never laid eyes on the likes of her.

She was small, and round in the proper places. Her hair was the color of a raven's wings, her eyes like black grapes, and the twist of her red mouth brought a lump to Johnny's throat. When she turned away and caught sight of him, she stopped with the awkward grace of a young filly, and uttered a little cry.

The sound of the ax ceased. Mrs. Bliss swung around and stared with hen-like curiosity. Johnny took his hat off and cleared his throat. Then he told them his reason for stopping by.

"So I mean to camp around here for a few days, if you don't mind," he concluded. "And if I find what I want I'll head for the settlement and stake my claim."

The man dropped his ax with obvious relief at the interruption, and came forward and introduced himself as Johnny swung down. His name was Elmore Bliss, and this was his wife, and this his daughter.

"But you aren't going to camp around here alone as long as there's an extra cot in the barn. Susanna, put another plate on. We have company!"

Susanna showed Johnny a smile that he felt clear down to the soles of his boots, as she whirled toward the house.

"You're invited to supper, Mr. Dubin," said Mrs. Bliss, "but that stump comes out first."

As she scurried to the barn, Elmore's gaze went over Johnny's mare, and stopped dead still as it hit the fiddle case strapped atop the gear behind the cantle. A slow grin spread across his whiskered face.

"Is that a fiddle you're toting?" he breathed.

Johnny allowed that it was. "I broke a horse for a feller at The Dalles, and he gave me the fiddle in lieu of cash, because he didn't have any money to spare."

Elmore shook his head in wonder. "He's a foolish feller to part with what sets a man to dancing and lifts his heart."

"Since he couldn't play it, he was mighty glad to get rid of the thing."

"The thing?" Elmore echoed softly. And then he added, "Got strings? Got a bow?" When Johnny said sure, Elmore sighed. "I had a fiddle when we crossed the prairie, but an Injun arrow made kindling out of it. Do you play, Johnny?"

JOHNNY admitted that he couldn't play a note. Just then Mrs. Bliss returned from the barn with another ax which she held out to Johnny, her gaze bright and sharp. "Those who work, eat," she said in a meaningful tone. "Those who don't work, don't eat."

"Fair enough, ma'am," said Johnny.

He joined Elmore at the stump. It was dark by the time they chopped through the last of the roots. They hitched Elsie, the ox, to a singletree and threw a chain around the stump. Elsie leaned into her collar, and there was a great groaning and grunting from the earth as the stump tore lose.

Mrs. Bliss made a sound of grim pleasure. "Dump it in the gully," she said. "Then fill that hole and wash up. After that you two can come in to supper.' '

During the bountiful meal, Johnny was hard put to keep his eyes away from Susanna. And he was more than a little surprised that the family had only arrived in Oregon the previous year.

"Why, this place looks as if it's been here for years," he said. "I never saw the beat of it, the amount of work you folks have done in so short a time."

"Elmore's a bear for work," said Mrs. Bliss, and gave her husband a grim look. "If a body keeps after him, that is."

Elmore bowed his head at this, but his eyes strayed toward the fiddle case in the corner.

"Eat your vittles, Elmore!" Mrs. Bliss said sharply. "You have time enough to make that music box squeal." She turned to Johnny and said with a sort of prim pride, "Elmore's one of the strongest men in these parts. That's why it puzzles me how he can sit and enjoy the squeal of a fiddle." She reached over and pinched Johnny's arm. "You aren't listening to me, boy!"

"Huh?" Johnny said, and pulled his gaze reluctantly from Susanna. "What was it you said, ma'am?"

"It's not what I said that matters, it's what I'm going to say that you'd better heed. Susanna's bespoken to Avis Harvey, or near to it. Avis works in the store at the settlement. He's a good steady boy, and he's saving his money to buy farm tools and what stock and seed he needs to get started on a claim. I'm thinking that one day he'll have the best farm in the district. If he doesn't, I'll be mighty disappointed." She glanced sharply at her daughter. "Mighty disappointed."

Johnny guessed, from the way she spoke, that she would take Avis in hand before it ever reached the point where she might suffer disappointment. The fact that Susanna was bespoken, or near to it, was hard to take, though. Johnny didn't know why for certain, but it kind of shook him up. Well, near to it wasn't final, he consoled himself. The water hadn't all run under the bridge.

"You say you're fixing to look around, and maybe file on a claim," Mrs. Bliss said. "But it takes money to get started." She let it hang there, her sharp gaze measuring Johnny as though he didn't have a dime in his jeans.

She was a shrewd one, Johnny thought. She had a will of iron, too. Elmore was three times as big as her, and yet she handled him like a mother would handle a small boy. Johnny told himself that she wasn't going to handle him the same way. He glanced at her casually and said, "I worked here and there along the trail, and did a little prospecting in Colorado; things like that. I reckon I can stock a farm as well as the next man."

"Hump," said Mrs. Bliss, but her gaze softened a little. "I'm not in sympathy with a young fellar that spends his time traipsing around the country, but if he can make money while he's doing it, maybe it's not so sinful at that."

Elmore squirmed in his chair and looked openly at the fiddle case. Then he cleared his throat and went after it. His big hands opened the case quickly, and the sight of the fiddle brought a crooning sound from his throat. His fingers seemed to caress the instrument as he turned it.

He rosined the bow and started on "Turkey In the Straw," his face shining, his eyes intent.

Mrs. Bliss began to tap her foot, and Susanna swayed delicately in her chair in time to the music. Johnny had trouble keeping his own feet still, and he wondered what Mrs. Bliss would say if he grabbed Susanna around the waist and whirled her about the floor.

When Elmore finally took a breather, Mrs. Bliss said with snappish pride, "It wasn't bad, but you're not playing like you used to. I suppose now you'll be wanting to fiddle at the settlement on Saturday night."

"It'd pleasure me," Elmore admitted hopefully, and put the fiddle carefully back in its case. "If Johnny aims to stay here that long, that is."

Mrs. Bliss glanced from Johnny to Susanna. "From the looks of it," she observed dryly, "he'll stay longer."

She chased Susanna off to bed and followed shortly, saying Elmore would show Johnny his bunk in the barn. Johnny lay awake for some time and thought about Susanna.

There's not much doubt but what she likes your looks, he thought. So you'd better shine while you have the chance. He went to sleep with a smile on his lips.

EARLY next morning Johnny saddled his mare and took a short scout around the little valley. When he got back, breakfast was on the table. The sight of Susanna made him blurt out, "That land across the creek is about the prettiest I've laid eyes on in a coon's age. There's a little grove of live oak where the creek bends that would be the ideal spot for a cabin."

Susanna gave a little gasp and looked round-eyed at him. "But that's where Avis is fixing to file," she said.

"He hasn't filed yet, has he?"

"Well, no," she said slowly, and her eyes sharpened a little as she studied Johnny.

"Since you're fixing to farm," said Mrs. Bliss, "you'd best get your hand in. There are five acres of corn coming up that need hoeing. It's purely sinful the way the weeds keep sprouting."

Elmore cleared his throat. "Johnny's our guest, and it's not fitting to put him to work."

"It's for his own good," Mrs. Bliss answered promptly. "If a man wants to farm, he has to learn, and I reckon you can teach him."

Johnny took this as his cue, thinking that it wouldn't hurt to get Mrs. Bliss on his side. He bowed his head a little. "I reckon your wife is right, Elmore. A man learns by doing, not by watching. While we're working you can be telling me what crops are best, and about marketing 'em and such. And I'll need to get a line on what tools to buy." He glanced at Mrs. Bliss and saw her prim nod of satisfaction.

"Now that's being sensible," she said, as though Johnny had reached the decision all by himself. "You'll be surprised how much you'll learn by Saturday."

Saturday morning, his back sore from bending over a hoe, Johnny helped Elmore hitch the wagon for the trip to the settlement. Susanna came from the house carrying a basket, and her dazzling smile made Johnny's heart sing. What with working from morning till night, he hadn't had a chance to be alone with her. Now he told himself firmly that nothing could keep him from winning her hand. Resentment clawed in his chest at the thought that Avis Harvey considered himself bespoken to Susanna. Johnny decided grimly that he would have to do something about that today.

Mrs. Bliss came out at the last minute and ordered Elmore to take a final look around the place. It was a pity she was so snappish and bossy, but that was a cross Elmore had to bear. Susanna wasn't at all like her mother, a fact that had Johnny thanking his lucky stars. A man would be better off unmarried, than spending his life with a wasp-tongued woman.

It was late afternoon when they reached the settlement at the forks. Already dozens of wagons were parked in a field; horses, mules and oxen were tethered in the deep grass. A slow throng of settlers in calico and homespun wended their way in and out of stores, and considerable laughter and rough talk came from the corner saloon.

Mrs. Bliss and Susanna got down in front of the big mercantile, and Elmore drove on. Johnny helped him unhitch and peg the team. On the way back they stopped at the saloon.

They were about to leave when a brawny man in a butternut shirt called, "You there, Elmore! Give us a tune, bucko!"

Elmore looked pleased as others took up the cry. "I don't reckon Mrs. Bliss would mind," he told Johnny, and took the fiddle from the case.

As he began to play, the brawny man hooted into a jug and kept time. Boots stomped the puncheon floor, and a bearded man yelled, "Hoedown!"

They were still working on the tune when a man toting a banjo joined in. From the looks of it they were set for the rest of the day, Johnny decided, so he slipped outside and made his way to the mercantile.

The moment he came inside he saw Susanna talking to a clerk, and he guessed that this was Avis Harvey. He saw a big, towheaded young man with a bull-like chest and hands as big as hams. He looked kind of simple in the face, though, sort of cow-like. But his expression changed to pure scowl when Susanna noticed Johnny and called him over.

When she introduced them, she said, "Mr. Dubin has been giving Pa a hand, Avis. Mr. Dubin is thinking of settling in the valley."

Avis grunted. As they shook hands to see who could break the most bones, Avis allowed that a man had the right to settle where he pleased. Johnny grunted in turn, aware that they understood each other. Before the dance started, he'd managed to work up a hatred for Avis Harvey, and he knew it was being returned in kind.

It was a roaring, rowdy hoedown at the meeting house that evening. Women suffering from cabin fever let themselves go and showed the good sinfulness that was in them; and the men whooped and pranced as they tried to outshine each other, between trips to the jugs stached in the grass outside.

Elmore, bowing and scraping like a man possessed, was in his glory. He didn't appear to hear when Mrs. Bliss said right out that a drinking man was a foolish man, and that she'd stand for no foolishness in her family.

LONG before midnight, Johnny knew that he and Avis were bound to tangle. It was so obvious they had their sights set for each other that all the other young bucks steered shy of Susanna. She was more or less forced to dance turn about with Avis and Johnny.

Then, all in a flash, it started. Avis threw a challenge that Johnny flung back. If it hadn't been that wiser heads led them outside, they would have tangled then and there.

As it was, they began to pound each other the second they cleared the doorway. Spitting and snarling like wildcats, they rolled in the street's dust. Ten minutes later Johnny knew he was in for a fight, for Avis was quick as a running deer and strong as a bull. Time and again Johnny connected with everything he had, and still he couldn't knock Avis down.

When he went down himself, Johnny took his time collecting his scattered senses, knowing that if Avis licked him he might as well keep traveling. As he got set to rise, he saw Susanna on the edge of the crowd.

Even though his eyes were nearly hammered shut, he couldn't help but notice the way she bit her lip with uncertainty, looking from him to Avis as though trying to make up her mind. The sight of her brought him to his feet, and he tore into Avis desperately.

He slashed Avis on the jaw and stunned him on the temple. He locked fists and swung them as though he were gripping an ax. The blow caught Avis square on the chin, and he pitched forward and lay still.

Susanna uttered a cry of triumph, and threw her arms around Johnny. Avis saw this, and despair twisted his bloody features. He rose, utterly beaten by what he had witnessed, and plowed through the crowd like a man gone blind. Susanna didn't take notice. She led Johnny to the well and washed his battered face.

"I'm so proud," she crooned softly. "Avis was said to be the strongest man in the district, and you whipped him." She added hesitantly, "You'll be staying for sure, won't you?"

"That's only the half of it," Johnny said, and kissed her hungrily.

She pushed away, and her voice sharpened. "Then you'd best file on that piece of land you've had your eye on."

"Now hold it a minute, honey. You said Avis was fixing to file there."

"He won't be wanting it now," Susanna said. "So you file after church tomorrow. The stores'll be open in the afternoon, and folks'll be raring to trade—" She looked at him

sharply. "You weren't fooling when you hinted that you had money, were you?"

Johnny admitted modestly that he had over three hundred dollars in his money belt, and Susanna gasped with delight.

"Why, Johnny, that's a fortune! Tomorrow we can dicker to buy a team and wagon and whatever else we need."

"That's right," Johnny said. "I'll build the cabin, and then afterward I can start plowing."

"Oh, no, that's figuring it wrong," Susanna said. "Since it's getting along in the season, you'll have to start plowing first thing. You can work on the cabin during the evenings. The main thing is to get the crops in." She took his hand. "Now let's go back to the dance so I can show you off. There are a lot of folks I want you to meet—including the preacher!"

A week later, Johnny woke up, stretched his tired muscles, and yawned. He hated the thought of getting up with the dawn. Then it came to him that this was Sunday, and with a blissful sigh he turned over to go back to sleep. A door slammed in Elmore's house, feet scurried across the yard, and the barn door cracked open.

"Johnny!" said Susanna sharply. "You're oversleeping, Johnny!"

Johnny raised himself up. "Why, now, Susanna, this is the Lord's day," he protested.

"I'm sure the Lord will forgive you for working today. Rise and shine!"

Johnny rose, groaning. He was learning that Susanna could be a tormentor when her mind was set, and he wasn't sure that he liked it. When he stepped outside, he looked across the creek and decided that he'd done a lot of plowing this past week. On top of that, he had half his cabin finished.

Still, he couldn't feel very proud. But then he reasoned that the little doubts which worried him were only natural. He'd jumped in with both feet, so to speak. Sighing deeply, he turned to the house for his breakfast, telling himself that all his wishes were coming true.

It won't be long now, he thought, till you'll be able to climb to that rise and look down on your own farm. By then it'll be Mrs. Dubin who'll call you for breakfast, not Miss Bliss.

THEY hadn't spoken of setting a date yet, though, so it came as a surprise to Johnny when Mrs. Bliss brought the subject up the following Friday. "I mean to see the preacher and make arrangement for the wedding," she said. "I figured Susanna and I would go in alone, but I'm thinking you two'll laze while we're gone, so you might as well come along."

"We are staying for the dancing?" Elmore asked hopefully.

Mrs. Bliss eyed him sharply. "I don't know. You made a fool out of yourself, what with playing and drinking in the saloon last time, and I'll not have that happen again."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Then Susanna and I'll go in my wagon, because we're staying for the dance."

"You'd best think about working instead of frolicking," Mrs. Bliss snapped. She turned away grumbling when Susanna flashed her a look.

"I reckon it won't hurt us to attend the dancing," Susanna said. "But there's no need for us to go in two wagons."

Johnny guessed not. But he was getting fed up with Mrs. Bliss's bossing ways, and it was about time he put his foot down. "I reckon I can take my bespoken in my own wagon," he said, and went out to continue his plowing.

Susanna tried to get him to change his mind, next morning, but Johnny was firm. She kept her lips prissed up all the way to the settlement, and she only spoke once.

"Ma's right. Ma's thinking of our future, and so should you."

"Right about what?" Johnny said.

Susanna's cheeks grew pink and she wouldn't answer. Johnny gave her a sidelong look. He hoped with all his heart that she wouldn't turn out to be a duplicate of her mother.

Johnny stopped at the preacher's house, Elmore directly behind him. The two women got down and went inside. Johnny and Elmore drove on to the field and unhitched and pegged their teams. Elmore sighed dolefully.

"I tried to sneak your fiddle in the wagon, but my wife stopped me."

"You're afraid of her, Elmore," Johnny accused.

"It's time that did it, I reckon," Elmore

said uneasily. "It wears a man down like water does a rock. You wait, Johnny, till you've been married a few months." It was then he noticed the twenty-odd wagons parked on the other side of the settlement. "It's a new wagon train. There'll be a heap of visiting today, Johnny boy!"

Elmore was right. Already there was a crowd in and around the meeting hall. There was a continual flurry of questions and answers, and there was laughter and some tears.

"We're the Carters from Iowa, and we were certain we'd meet the Tanners here. You folks sure you never heard of them?"

"We're pushing on for California in the morning," a man said cheerfully. "My brother wrote saying it's fine country, and my daughter and I are fixing to head that way."

"We figure to locate near Oregon City. You reckon there's still land available?"

A golden-haired girl caught Johnny's eye, and he winked at her. That's one place I haven't been, Johnny thought. California. And I reckon that's one place I'll never see, either.

He wandered around looking for Susanna, but he saw no sign of her. She must be getting things fixed up for the wedding next month, he guessed. It was astonishing the number of things that had happened to him since the day he'd ridden into Elmore's yard.

The dance began after dark, and still there was no sign of Susanna. So he spotted the golden-haired girl and asked her for a turn, and she laughed with quick delight. Her name, she said, was Abigail Adams, and she was the one who was going with her father to California. When the music ceased, Susanna made her way through the crowd to Johnny's elbow.

"I've been waiting for you to claim me," she said crossly. "But if you're planning to dance with every flighty gal in the place, I can turn about and sidle up to Avis Harvey." As though to prove her point, she indicated Avis at the edge of the floor.

"I'll dance this one with you, and then you can go dance with Avis," said Johnny.

"Hump," said Susanna. "Well, we're not staying long, anyhow. Ma says we'd best get back by midnight so you can work on the cabin tomorrow."

Johnny felt words sprouting inside him, but he held them back. He walked outside when the dance ended. And it struck him like a stroke of lightning that already Susanna was turning out to be just like her mother, giving orders without a by-your-leave. As Elmore had said, they'd wear a man down like water does a rock. Johnny felt a sudden desire to head for California.

He had his obligations, though, and he couldn't very well walk out on them. Besides, he already had nearly two hundred dollars tied up in tools and such. Johnny started to think like he'd never thought before. And then he had it! Both Mrs. Bliss and her daughter took pride in their men's strength. They probably took more pride in being able to control that strength, when you came right down to it. But the point was that the way they felt left no doubt. It would be worth finding out for sure, anyhow, Johnny thought.

It wasn't easy, but not hard either. Avis Harvey had had two weeks to get straightened around, and he was in a scowling mood. When Johnny had his say within Avis's hearing, he saw Avis charge down on him.

"You not only stole my gal and my land," Avis said, "you're talking behind my back. I reckon I have satisfaction coming."

"You'll be a long time getting it," Johnny said, and gave Avis a blow.

They fought much as they had before. Those who witnessed both fights couldn't see much difference between them, but three or four men were heard to say later that "Johnny didn't show the vinegar he showed that other time."

Johnny went down finally and stayed down for a while, long enough to see Susanna divide her uncertain stare between his hangdog look and Avis's bloody grin of pride. When she threw her arms around Avis with a little cry, Johnny sidled out of the crowd with a sigh of relief, thinking that it had been a close thing.

Driving home, he figured it out. He'd saddle his mare and head back for the settlement, and in the morning he'd have a talk with Avis. A man of that size should have two hundred dollars on hand.

Johnny let out a whoop of pure joy. California or bust, he thought. And who can tell but what I'll meet that golden-haired Abigail, on the trail. It was a wonderful thought!

EVERY rodeo cowboy knows that half the battle in a roping or dogging contest is won by the horse. There are dozens of excellent roping horses, one or more for every top roper.

But a good dogging horse is harder to come by. It is an amazing fact that there are never more than five or six really great dogging horses in all of rodeo at one time. These few account for a huge percentage of the winnings in this event. The lucky owner of such a mount can do very well without wrestling a single steer himself, simply by renting the horse out to all comers for a percentage of the winnings.

We never heard of a rodeo cowboy retiring and letting his horse do all the work, because any top-hand who has managed to train an expert has by that time become so expert himself that the team of horse and man is a nearly unbeatable combination.

There's a reason for the scarcity of dogging mounts, as compared to roping horses to a reason that can be summed up in one word, practice. And it's easy to see why, when you think of the fun to be had in practicing roping, compared to the hard work and danger involved in practicing steer wrestling.

Actually, few cowboy bulldoggers even own their own mounts, partly because of the difficulty and poor chance of success in training a cow pony, and partly because good dogging horses are available for the borrowing at all the big rodeos.

According to Willard H. Porter, the dogging and roping authority of *Rodeo Sports News*, there aren't more than a dozen "real, sincere dogging horse trainers in the country today." Among them he lists such cowboys as Benny and Willard Coombs, Harley May, Wilbur Plaugher, Lex Connelly and James Bynum —which, by the way, is more than half the list of the top ten bulldoggers in rodeo.

This small group of ten or twelve are the only cowboys who regularly practice at home and during the off season, and therefore take on new horses for training occasionally.

More often than not, the horse chosen for training doesn't make the grade, although the candidate has been carefully selected before the training begins.

Perhaps you never thought of words like level-headedness, honesty, and heart as applying to a horse, but they are the words which best describe what a trainer looks for in a green pony.

Level-headedness means, of course, that the horse won't spook in unexpected situations, which are the rule rather than the exception in the arena. An honest horse does his best every time he's called in, and a horse with heart gives even a little more than that, when the chips are down.

A few weeks or months will tell the expert trainer whether or not the horse has the basic ability, but only many more months of practice in the corral, and performance in the arena, will tell whether he's great.

Some trainers keep a new horse on the practice field for as long as a year. Others take him into the arena for competitive conditioning as soon as he has learned the fundamentals of bulldogging.

There has been only one horse in rodeo history who was a natural. Dave Campbell's Laddie went into the arena absolutely green, and proved very quickly that he was one of the best doggers of all time.

But he was unique. Horses, like cowboys, need plenty of practice to develop the split-second coordination and the coolness under pressure which accomplish the remarkable feat of subduing a bull in three seconds flat.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

"Looks like it's my day to be everybody's target," Suddath said.

FAIR WARNING

By LARRY POWELL

DAVE MORRIS went out into the gray of morning and stood before the hotel for a moment, looking toward the unfinished house on the hill south of Main and Clark streets. He smiled, lit a cigarette, and walked south on Main, his heels ringing loudly on the board walk. Paradise Town was quiet now, but soon it would rouse and come alive with the sound of building.

Horses would crowd into the streets, and bonnets would appear on the walks as women came out to do their shopping. The bench in Morris's barber shop would be filled by checker players and by trail hands who looked as if they had never shaved.

Dave Morris had been a trail hand himself when he came to Paradise Town. Then he met Alice Linton, and everything changed. He had started to build a new life then and, like the house on the hill, it would soon be complete.

Dave came to his shop and paused, fum-

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TO DAVE MORRIS, there was a right and a wrong way to act . . . even if doing the right thing meant he would have to kill a man

bling for his keys. Then his eyes fell on the Paradise Bar at the corner of Main, and his fingers became still. Ben Suddath stood on the walk outside the saloon, with his hands in the pockets of his tightly-fitted trousers, looking directly at Dave.

The saloon owner was too far away for Dave to make out his expression. Even so, Dave could feel the sting of Suddath's hard gaze.

Fire touched Dave's fingers, and he remembered his cigarette. He threw the stub away and unlocked the shop. When he turned, Suddath was gone. Self-consciously, Dave unshuttered his windows.

A wagon loaded with lumber turned the corner past the saloon, and the driver waved. "Mr. Morris, I'm afraid the house won't be ready as soon as I figured," he said when Dave went over.

"Why, Tuttle? What's the trouble?"

"Ben Suddath." Tuttle slapped a thin knee and kept his eyes carefully lowered. "He hired away my help. I can't blame the boys, I reckon; Suddath can pay more."

Dave's anger rose, but he forced it down. "I guess there's nothing we can do. But it won't make Alice happy."

"Sorry, Mr. Morris." Tuttle lifted the reins and his wagon moved away.

Dave stood alone in the street. A hammer sounded tauntingly, was joined by another, and a carpenter's call drifted in the air. Men were at work on Ben Suddath's new saloon.

This move by Suddath was no more than an annoyance. But the first move didn't make a checker game, and Dave knew Suddath would act again. The only thing he didn't know was how far Suddath would go to get revenge. Thinking this, Dave's hand went to the gun at his hip.

Back in the shop, Dave scanned the equipment of his trade: the chair, the long mirror, and the toiletries. He'd learned barbering from his father. "You were born with the touch," his father had said.

But town life had never appealed to Dave. When his father died, he had signed on with the Crooked L. He was still with it when he first saw Paradise Town and Alice Linton.

Now he was settled to this way of living, to this shop and the house on the hill. When the home was completed, he and Alice were to be married. No one, Dave thought violently, Ben Suddath or anyone else, can kill that dream.

Alice still had to be told about the house, and Dave decided glumly to get it over with. He pulled the shop door shut and went down to Jud Linton's store.

ALICE was already there, behind the counter. As always, Dave found himself looking at her longer than he should have. Today she had her yellow hair tied back with a bright ribbon, and wore a new gingham dress that did not hide the young challenge of her body.

"Alice—" Dave began.

She leaned across the counter and touched his arm, her blue eyes soft and understanding. "I know, Dave. Mr. Tuttle was in this morning."

"It won't delay us long, Alice."

"Why must Ben Suddath try to get back at you? All you did was buy some property he wanted. He's already building his new saloon somewhere else. Why can't he leave you alone?"

"It isn't the property any more." Dave played nervously with his hat. "It's getting back at me. Suddath has a cruel kind of pride that he feels he must salvage."

"How far will it go, Dave?"

Dave patted her hand. "Don't worry about it."

Out in the street again, he turned back toward the barber shop. He had taken only a few steps when he realized that someone was close on his heels. Stepping aside, he wheeled to put his back against a nearby building.

He found himself with his gun half drawn, and felt his face flush when he saw that it was a woman behind him.

She tilted her head and laughed huskily. "Jumpy, aren't you?"

Dave rubbed the back of his neck and felt like a dunce. "I thought you were following me."

"You were right."

The woman was slim but mature of body, dressed well but flashily, and her eyes were as keen and confident as those of a man.

"You know who I am?" she asked, and suddenly Dave did know.

The situation touched Dave's sense of humor. A faint grin twisted his mouth. "You're Retha Cord."

Retha Cord was Ben Suddath's woman.

"You can get out of this fix, Morris. Sell that property and get out of town, and take the girl with you."

"I take it you're warning me, Miss Cord. Why?"

"I've seen you and Alice Linton together. You're a nice couple. I'd hate to see you lose your chance." Her voice was almost pleading. "You don't know Ben Suddath. I do. People are laughing at him, saying you backed him down, and that hurts his pride. Nobody ever stood up to Ben before. Now he's going to make an object lesson of you. Get out, Morris, or he'll kill you."

Dave touched his hat as she went past.

He could see what Retha Cord meant. If Dave left town everyone would know he was running away from Suddath. That would save Suddath's pride. If Dave remained in Paradise Town, he would have to fight.

Dave found Thomas Boone, Paradise Town's marshal, sitting at his desk and looking at the cracks in the ceiling. Boone gave Dave a glance and then returned to his study of the ceiling.

"What can I do for you, barber?"

"I need some help. Ben Suddath is planning to kill me."

"Now how do you know that?"

"I know. Look, Boone, maybe if you talked to Suddath, he'd call this play off and nobody would be hurt."

Boone sat up. "Suddath hasn't broken any laws. My job is keeping the peace in Paradise. I'm strictly a town marshal, nothing else. If Ben downs you in anything but a fair fight, then it'll be my concern. But I'm not a private protective society for people Ben Suddath doesn't like."

Dave clenched his fists. "Are you afraid of Suddath?"

"Aren't you?" Boone said.

Dave left him sitting there.

That afternoon, Dave walked Alice home from the store, keeping carefully away from Suddath's side of the street. When they came opposite the Paradise Bar, Dave felt Alice press his arm. He looked and saw Suddath standing on the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets, that cold look in his eyes.

"He's looking at us," Alice whispered.

Dave hurried her on.

"Why is everyone afraid of him, Dave? I saw him walking the street this afternoon, and men were falling all over themselves to clear his path. It's disgusting to see the way this town trembles when he speaks."

DAVE knew then that he would stay in Paradise Town and fight if need be. He had supper with the Lintons that night, and it was not a happy meal. Jud Linton was strangely silent, and Dave was preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Only Alice talked, and finally even she gave up. They said uncomfortable good nights and Dave left, knowing that Alice had been hurt by his silence. But he couldn't stop thinking about his sure knowledge that, in a gun duel, his chances against Ben Suddath were mighty thin.

Dave saw the cigarette glow waiting in the darkness of the hotel porch, and his steps slowed. Nerves tensed, he shifted the holster on his hip.

"Suddath?" he called when he reached the steps.

"It's me," Suddath said. "Take it easy, Morris."

Dave stood with his hand on his gun while the saloon owner moved to meet him. He could not make out Suddath's face in the night, but the man's features came to him sharply from memory. Suddath had sharp, bony cheeks, thick eyebrows, and a flat mouth. And his gray eyes were sharper than you could hone any razor.

"Now's as good a time as any, Suddath," Dave said.

Suddath cursed, and Dave was puzzled, because Suddath's tone was admiring. Then Suddath said, "Retha Cord carried you a warning. Have you thought it over?"

So he knew about the Cord woman's errand. Perhaps he had even sent her.

"I'm not leaving town," Dave said slowly. "I have my pride too."

"I'll make you a deal. You sell the prop-

erty to me, the boys get off my back, and it's quits between me and you. What do you say?"

"No deal."

Suddath sighed. "I can see the way it's going to be between me and you. I'm going to be forced to kill you; otherwise you'll keep coming back for more."

Dave saw the red glow flash through the night as Suddath flipped his cigarette away. "Okay, Morris," the saloon owner said. "It'll be the next time we meet."

Dave had barely reached his room when he heard the door rattle. His gun ready, he opened it. Alice rushed into his arms.

"We must leave town, Dave, right away." She must have been running, Dave thought, listening to the sound of her breathing. "After you left, Dad told me. It's all over town."

Dave spoke soothing words and smoothed back her rumpled hair. "You can't fight him," Alice protested.

"You didn't feel that way this afternoon."

"I didn't know then that he hated you so much. Dad says he's deadly fast with a gun."

Dave shut off her words with a kiss. "Wait until I get my hat, and I'll walk you home," he said softly.

It was a long night for Dave, after he had left her. Light had started to seep through the clouds before he finally slept. When he awoke, the sun streamed in at the window with a burning heat. It was mid-morning.

When Dave reached the barber shop, he found Thomas Boone loafing in the doorway. Boone grinned. "Looks like your troubles are over, barber."

"What do you mean?" Dave said, with a start.

Boone gestured. "See those two horses? Some friends of Suddath's rode in this morning."

Dave's eyes went to the horses hitched before his shop, and then passed on to a man leaning in the mouth of an alley two doors away. Then he understood.

"You mean these men are gunning for Suddath."

"Yeah. A man like Suddath is bound to make some enemies of his own kind. The fellow in the alley is Budge. Tarleton's down that way." Boone's head jerked toward the other end of the street. "When Suddath leaves the saloon, they'll have him in a cross-fire."

"They're going to bushwhack him." Dave's words were harsh. "And you're going to let them."

"You aren't very observant. Don't you see I'm not wearing a badge? I turned it in this morning, when I saw those boys ride in. I'm not in their class any more than you are."

"You make me sick," Dave said, and began to walk away.

Boone seized his arm. "You aren't going to warn Suddath, are you? If these birds don't kill you, Suddath will."

Suddath had, in his own way, warned him, Dave thought. So had Retha Cord. But there was a right and a wrong here that went beyond all that. There were a lot of men like Boone, unwilling to help Dave and unwilling to help Suddath. In comparison, Suddath's hard code looked good. At least Suddath *had* a code.

Dave shook off Boone's hand as he would an annoying fly, and walked into the street. The sun heated his back. He thought of the guns in the alley behind him, and cold perspiration formed on his brow. But finally the steps of the Paradise Bar were before him.

HE WENT up them slowly and pushed through the saloon doors. Except for a sleeping drunk and a bartender, the place was empty.

Then Suddath came through some curtains at the rear. "Stand where you are, Morris," he called, his hand moving.

"Hold it," Dave shouted.

There was a thud, and the floor shook. Dave knew that the bartender had thrown himself to safety behind the bar. The drunk slept on, and Suddath waited.

"I came to warn you—" Dave began.

Suddath yelled and drowned out the rest of Dave's sentence.

"Drop, Morris. Drop, damn it."

Dave felt the floor slap against his elbows as he obeyed. Guns made sharp, deadly noises. Twisting, Dave got out his own gun and rolled to face the saloon door. He saw one man sprawled several feet away, and

another hanging on to the batwings. Then the second man fell.

Budge and Tarleton must have followed him into the saloon, Dave thought. Perhaps they had planned to use him as a shield. Whatever their reasons, it was of no importance now.

Dave stood up and faced Suddath. The saloon owner's gun was lifted shoulder high and smoke floated from the barrel to cross his sharp face like a veil. Suddath was deadly fast, all right. Dave knew he would have no chance at all in a gunfight with this man.

"It's time we settled things between us, Morris."

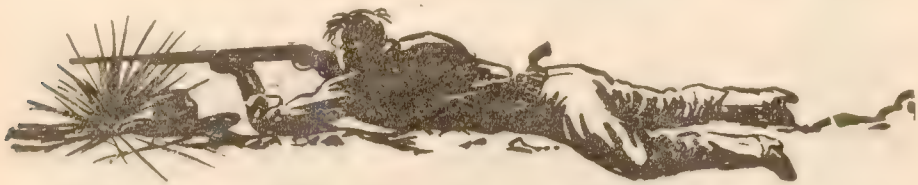
"I reckon so," Dave said, his nerves tightening.

"Will you bring the girl out here, Retha," he heard Suddath say, and saw Retha Cord push aside the curtain behind the saloon owner. She had Alice by the arm.

"Miss Linton tried to run me out of town a while ago," Suddath said. "Looks like it's my day to be everybody's target. Luckily, Retha managed to disarm the little lady."

Suddath smiled. "You tried to warn me, Morris. I reckon that squares things between us. I'll send your carpenters back tomorrow."

Then Alice was in Dave's arms, and any more words would have been wasted.



Coming up in the next issue of RANCH ROMANCES

A BULLET FOR BRENDA

She bought a man's gun and paid cash for it but his loyalty wasn't for sale at any price

A Magazine-Length Novel

By RAY GAULDEN

MIDNIGHT AT NOON

Sam went out to track down a killer . . . knowing that if his hunt succeeded he might start a bloody range war

An Exciting Novelette

By CHARLES BURNSON

NIGHT IN TOWN

Friendship died hard with Matt . . . but could he give up both his money and his girl for old times' sake?

A Western Short Story

By J. L. BOUMA

"Tell me what happened today that's worrying you," Jane said tenderly.

The MAN FROM YESTERDAY

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

THE STORY SO FAR: In accordance with his late father's wishes, NEAL CLARK takes over the running of the family bank. Neal hates his job, especially when BEN DARLEY and TUCK SHELTON start a phony irrigation project and Neal is blamed because he won't lend his friends money to invest in the scheme. Neal is also troubled because, many years ago, he shot a couple of bank robbers, and recently he has been receiving notes from the surviving member of the gang, ED SHELLY, saying he is coming to get revenge. Neal's brother PAUL falls for Darley's daughter, VICKY, and Neal, though he loves his wife JANE and daughter LAURIE, is attracted to Darley's wife, FAY. Fay tries to get Neal to leave town, telling him Darley will kill him if Neal keeps interfering with Darley's schemes. Neal meets a stranger who tells Neal he has delivered to Paul another note from Shelly.

PART TWO

TWILIGHT was rapidly becoming darkness when Neal reached the barn behind his house. He lighted a lantern and hung it on a nail behind Redman's stall; he pulled gear from the animal and watered and fed him. When he stepped back into the runway, he saw that Paul was standing there.

Neal said as casually as if it were of no

significance, "I hear you have a letter for me."

"You ran into Ruggles?" Paul asked, surprised.

"Ruggles?"

"That's his name, Vicky said. He was in Darley's office once when Vicky was helping her mother with the books. He's a tall, slim man who looks like a gunslinger."

"He didn't have a gun when I saw him."

"I took it away from him," Paul said, and told Neal what had happened. He handed Neal the letter, asking, "Did you have trouble with him?"

"A little. I cracked him one, and left him leaning against a pine tree saying he would get both of us in the morning, only I wouldn't be around."

Neal tore the letter open. There, on a single sheet of paper, was a message printed by a dull pencil, exactly as the note he'd found in his pocket had been. " 'Yesterday has become today, Clark,' " Neal read aloud. " 'You'll pay for the murder of my father and brother, and so will your wife and girl. Ed Shelly.' "

Neal said, "Ed Shelly's dead. Joe Rolfe's told me that a dozen times. Did Ruggles say how he got this note?"

"He claimed a man in town paid him a dollar to give it to you. He said he didn't know who it was."

Neal shoved the paper into his pocket. "It's a bluff. It's got to be. Darley and Shelton have a man coming in on the stage from Portland tomorrow morning. They think they can get him to invest a lot of money in the project, so they want me out of town." He considered telling Paul about Mrs. Darley, then decided against it. "I'm not going to run, but we have to be careful. Where's the gun you took from Ruggles?"

Paul drew it from his waistband and gave it to Neal, a walnut-handled .45 Colt. It was a good gun with fine balance, possibly indicating that Ruggles was a gunslinger, as Paul thought.

Neal gave the gun. "Keep it, or get my .38. It's in my room; I brought it home from the bank today. But whatever you do, don't even stay in the house without having a gun on you."

Paul nodded as he slid the .45 under his waistband again. He said hesitantly, "Neal, I have something to tell you. Vicky and I . . ."

He swallowed, unable to say the words. Neal put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Paul, don't be afraid to talk to me. I'm not like Dad, although sometimes I think a little of his cussedness rubbed off on me. Jane told me about Vicky and you. Just be sure you love her. If you are, then go ahead and get married. I hope you'll have as good luck with her as I've had with Jane."

Paul stared down at the straw-littered floor of the barn. He said, "Thanks, Neal."

"A man needs a woman," Neal said. "The trick is to get the right one. Better talk to her about how it is between me and her dad. Before this is finished I'll kill him, or he'll kill me if he's lucky. As far as you two are concerned, one's about as bad as the other."

When they stepped into the kitchen, Jane was pouring gravy into a bowl. The room was filled with the tangy odor of supper. Neal took a long, sniffing breath.

"That's enough to make a man's mouth water until he's like to drown in it."

Jane looked at him, a question in her eyes. But, instead of asking, she smiled and said, "Go upstairs and wash, dear. It'll be just a minute."

Neal walked through the dining room, past the table with its white linen cloth and napkins, the lighted candles, the good silver, and the Ironwood plates. Jane was putting on a show tonight, Neal thought, something she seldom did because they didn't entertain often. The truth was they didn't have many good friends in town.

He went to the parlor, Paul remaining in the kitchen with Jane. Neal stopped, finding what he saw hard to believe. Vicky was holding Laurie on her lap, telling her the story of Cinderella. Now, watching Laurie, Neal lost the doubts he had had about Vicky.

LAURIE was a strange child in many ways. very shy, small for her age, and slow to make up with strangers. Vicky was a stranger, actually; Laurie had seen her only occasionally, and never for more than a few minutes at a time. But there could be no doubt about the child's feelings. She had completely accepted Vicky. She sat motionless, her wide eyes riveted upon Vicky's face, her

attention so completely held by the story that she was not even aware of Neal's presence.

Vicky, too, was engrossed in Cinderella's troubles, her sensitive face and voice portraying the emotions she described, fear and uncertainty and hope. Neal crossed the room and climbed the stairs as silently as he could, still amazed by what he had seen. When he came back to the parlor, Vicky was telling how Cinderella won her prince and was happy ever after.

Laurie clapped her hands, crying, "Tell me another one, Vicky."

"I don't think she has time, Laurie," Neal said. "Mamma told me a little while ago that supper was almost ready."

Laurie squealed, "Daddy!"

Jumping off Vicky's lap, she ran to him. He caught her under the arms and held her high, while she kicked and kept on squealing, "Daddy, Daddy." He brought her to him and hugged her, and she kissed him and put her arms around his neck. She said, "Vicky is the bestest story teller in the whole wide world, Daddy."

"You have just received a high compliment," Neal said. "You have been elected the bestest story teller in the whole, wide world."

Paul had come in from the dining room, and Vicky's eyes darted to him for reassurance, then returned to Neal. Her face was very pale. Neal saw the fluttering of the pulse in her throat, driven by her wildly beating heart. He realized for the first time how much it had cost her to come here tonight.

Vicky said, "Thank you," and edged toward Paul.

Neal had never really looked at the girl before, at least not without the conviction that he must dislike her because she was Ben Darley's daughter. Now he saw she was an unusually pretty girl with a natural sweetness of expression, and he wondered how she could possibly be the daughter of a man as ugly as Ben Darley, and a predatory woman like Fay.

"Paul told me about you two," Neal said. "Congratulations, and welcome into the family. I'd say Paul is a very lucky man."

"I think so," Paul said.

Wide eyed, Vicky stared at Neal, trying to hold back her tears. Then they broke through the dam and she whirled to Paul.

"Paul, I didn't think he'd be like this," she said a moment later.

"I didn't, either," Paul said, "but I hoped he would be."

From the dining room, Jane called, "Supper's ready."

Neal put Laurie down and gave her a pat on the back side. "Run," he said. "Get into your chair. Hurry." He motioned for Vicky and Paul to go ahead, then offered Jane his arm.

"I heard what you said," she whispered. "I think you're wonderful, just wonderful."

He winked at her. "I'll agree, just to keep peace in the family."

When they finished eating, Laurie said in a commanding tone, "I want another story, Vicky."

"It's time for you to go to bed," Jane said.

"Maybe just one," Neal said, looking at Vicky.

She nodded. "Of course."

So Neal put Laurie to bed, then Vicky sat down beside her and told her about Jack and the beanstalk. Neal stood at the foot of the bed until Vicky was done. Then he tucked the covers up around Laurie's shoulders, kissed her goodnight, and blew out the lamp.

"Go to sleep now," he said. "You've had everything you want."

"Not everything yet," Laurie said happily. "I'm going to get something else I want. I'm going to get a new aunt."

Vicky was halfway down the stairs when Neal caught her. He said, "Wait, Vicky." She turned, frightened by his voice, and he wondered why fear was so close to the surface in her. "You're wonderful with Laurie. I never saw anything like it."

Her sigh was an audible sound of relief. She said, "Laurie is a lovable little girl."

They went down the stairs together. When they reached the parlor, Vicky would have gone into the dining room if he had not caught her arm. "I want to talk to you a minute."

She shrank away from him, and again he had the impression that she was like a frightened bird, small and delicately beautiful, wanting to fly away but uncertain whether she should. He led her toward the couch.

"You're going to Corvallis to spend the rest of the year with Paul?"

"Yes."

"You can help him," Neal said.

"I want to help," she said.

"Vicky, there's one question I have to ask. Suppose I kill your father. Would you still love Paul?"

He said it bluntly and brutally, but she was not bothered by the question. She looked squarely at him as she said, "Mr. Clark—I mean Neal—there's nothing in the world that would keep me from loving Paul. Nothing."

"About this man Ruggles—"

"I told Paul all I know. I've seen him in the office. He said he had business with Shelton."

"But not with your father?"

"No, it was with Shelton." She rose. "I'd better see if I can help with the dishes."

She left the room, carrying her head high and proud. She'd do, he thought, she'd do fine for Paul. He had started to reach for tobacco and paper, when he heard the doorbell. He glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was half past nine. He hadn't realized it was so late. He walked into the hall, having no idea who would be calling at this time of night.

UNEASINESS gripped him. He thought about Ruggles, a wild man, maybe a crazy one. He might have found a gun. Neal drew his pistol and, holding it in his right hand, turned the knob with his left and flung the door open. No one was in sight. Then he saw the envelope on the threshold and, stooping, picked it up.

He closed the door and, tearing the envelope open, took out the sheet of paper. Unfolding it, he held it up to the bracket lamp on the wall. The words were printed by that same dull pencil. "Did you think I forgot you? Not after waiting eight years. I'm going to get Laurie, and I won't wait much longer. Ed Shelly."

He folded the paper, slipped it into the envelope, and dropped the envelope in his coat pocket. He leaned against the wall, his eyes closed. The notes had come three times within a matter of hours. He had been sure this was Darley's way of getting him out of town, that back of these threats was the simple matter of money. He had been certain Ed Shelly was dead. Now he wasn't certain, for a new and terrifying thought crept into his mind.

Suppose this crazy man Ruggles was really Ed Shelly, who had come back to get revenge? Instead of Darley's hiring Ruggles, maybe Ruggles had hired Mrs. Darley or Shelton or someone else to drop the first note into Neal's pocket. Maybe these notes had nothing to do with Darley's and Shelton's crooked scheme.

Neal had to find out. He wouldn't know who to fight until he did. But how? Then he thought of Jane and Laurie, and fear took possession of him, in his belly, in the crawling sensation along his spine, in a feeling he had never had before. He was still there in the hall when he heard Jane come back into the parlor with Paul and Vicky.

After Paul had left the house with Vicky, Neal went into the parlor, drew the couch around in front of the fireplace, and sat down, his long legs stretched out toward the fire.

He was not aware Jane had come into the room until she said, "Neal." He looked up at her and tried to smile, but it wouldn't quite come off. She knelt beside him and put her head against his leg. "You were sweet tonight. Vicky thinks you're wonderful, and I know Paul was satisfied."

"It's funny about Paul," he said. "I guess Vicky is the first girl he ever took seriously."

"Yes, I guess she is." Jane hesitated, her jaw set stubbornly. "Neal, we've got to talk. You don't make it easy. You have a little of the flint that was in your dad, enough to make you pretty hard-headed sometimes."

He was irritated by that, but he was too tired to argue. So he just said, "I didn't have a chance to pick my father."

"Of course not. I'm just trying to say that you always keep me in one part of your heart —the nice, easy part. I share your triumphs and jokes and the good things that happen to you, but I never get a chance to share your troubles. I want to, Neal. This way I feel as if I'm only being half a wife to you."

He stared at her, hurt by what she'd said and wanting to strike back. He had enough trouble without having her tell him he made her feel like half a wife. Then he saw the tenderness that was so plain to read in her face, and the resentment left him.

"I don't mean to," he said, "but it's my job to take care of you."

She got up and, sitting down beside him, took one of his hands. "And it's my job to take care of you, too, as much as I can. Now you have to tell me what happened today that's worrying you."

He hesitated, not wanting to tell her and yet finding some justice in what she had said. Besides, and this was what decided him, he had to tell Jane about the notes so she would be careful. So he told her everything except how he had felt when he saw Fay Darley in the company office, and again on the road beside the river.

"Can't Joe do something?" she asked when he finished. "Darley and Shelton must have a criminal record somewhere."

"They probably have," he said, "but chances are they've changed their names."

She was silent for a moment, her leg pressed against his, her hand squeezing his.

"I guess the part that I don't understand is why the bank's customers don't trust your judgment," she said. "They would have believed your father."

"I know," he said, "and it hurts. I understand it. I mean, I'm young, and new in the bank. And Darley has been smart in putting his scheme on a community basis. He's promised that the men who bought stock will have a chance to work on the ditch, so they'll have money to spend in O'Hara's Bar and Quinn's store. The company will buy horses from the livery stable and equipment from Olly Earl's hardware store. I can't say anything except that I'm saving them money when I won't make the loans they want. Darley twists that around by making them think I'm sore because I can't hog the profit."

"Don't worry about those notes," Jane said. "They're probably just bluff. But I'll stay in the house tomorrow and keep Laurie in."

"Paul has Ruggles's gun," Neal said. "My .38 is on the bureau. Better keep it handy tomorrow."

She nodded agreement and, putting a hand under his chin, tipped his head back and kissed him. Then she rose.

"I'm going to bed. Are you going to sit up?"

He nodded. "Don't stay awake for me. I couldn't go to sleep now if I did go to bed."

"You're tired, Neal." She hesitated, then murmured, "Goodnight, darling."

"Goodnight," he said, and watched as she went up the stairs to their bedroom.

HE HEARD the bedroom door close. Then the silence was tight and oppressive. He had to do something, but he couldn't think of anything except to get the sheriff, Joe Rolfe, out of bed and talk to him. But he didn't want to leave the house until Paul got back, so he smoked a cigarette, impatience nagging him.

A moment later the front door opened and closed and Paul came in, his face red with the cold. He asked, "Still up?" Walking to the fireplace, he held his hands out to the flames. He looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Silly question, wasn't it?"

"I don't know whether this is me or not," Neal said.

"It looks like you. Neal, I want to thank you." He turned and rubbed his hands together, embarrassed. "Hell, I don't know why I have such a time putting words together. I was trying to say I'm glad you were nice to Vicky."

"I was nice because she's nice." Neal wanted to say something about Paul's taking over the bank, but decided this wasn't the time. Instead he said, "You'll find that two can't live as cheaply as one. Come down to the bank in the morning and sign a note for whatever you want to borrow."

Paul hesitated, then said, "All right, if that's what you think I should do."

"I'm going to see Joe Rolfe now. Leave your door open when you go to bed, and keep that gun handy. I told Jane to hang onto my .38. We can't take any chances with Laurie's safety."

"Nobody would bother *her*, would they?" Paul said incredulously.

"I had another note tonight. It mentioned Laurie."

"I'll sleep with one eye open." Paul rubbed his hands along his pants legs, started to say something, stopped, then blurted, "I've been hearing some gossip you ought to know. The farmers are pretty sore. They blame you because they can't get money to invest."

"That's not news," Neal said.

"No, but maybe you don't know how far it's gone. There's a lot of lynch talk."

"Thanks," Neal said wearily. "Go on to bed."

After he was gone, Neal sat staring at the smoldering fire, wondering if Paul had exaggerated the lynch talk, or whether it was a seed someone had planted in his mind.

The clock on the mantel struck midnight. Neal got up and threw more wood on the fire. He had an odd feeling of detachment about all this. His emotions were like a sponge that had been completely saturated and could hold no more.

He had to see Laurie before he left the house. If anything happened to her— He went upstairs, driven by a compulsion he could not control. Jane had left a lamp burning in the bracket on the wall. Laurie's door was ajar. Gently he pushed it open and stepped into the room.

There was no possible way for anyone to get into her room execpt by coming up the stairs and along the hall, just as he had done. No one had gone past him. He had been in the parlor from the time Laurie had gone to bed, or in the hall, never more than thirty feet from the stairs.

She was all right. She had to be in bed just as he had left her. But he could not see her in the thin light that fell through the door from the hall. Suddenly panicky, he ran across the room, the horrible fear that she was gone taking breath out of his lungs as sharply as if he'd been hit in the stomach.

He stopped at the side of her bed, breathing hard. She lay next to the wall on the far side, almost hidden under the covers. For a time he stood motionless, shocked by what this moment of crazy panic had shown him.

No one else was as important to him as Laurie—Jane, Paul, not even his own life. He had known that all the time, but it took this moment of terror to make him fully realize it. He leaned over the bed, fighting an impulse to reach down and take her into his arms.

If he woke her, she would sense the fear that was in him. Jane had done a good job with Laurie, particularly in regard to fear. The child never fussed about going to bed or being left in the dark, as many children did. Whatever happened, Laurie must not know about this threat.

He should go, but still he lingered beside the bed, thinking how much Jane wanted other children. But, after Laurie's birth, Doc Santee had said the chances were slim that she would ever have another. For that reason Laurie meant more to both of them than she would have under other circumstances.

RELUCTANTLY he turned and left the room, leaving Laurie's door open so that Paul could hear if she cried out. He wanted to stay here, but he couldn't. He had to see Joe Rolfe. The sheriff had an ageless quality, a capacity for giving confidence to those around him. Right now confidence was something Neal lacked. He had never felt before the way he did now, as if he were fighting an unknown that was vague and shapeless, but utterly terrifying.

He put on his hat and sheepskin and went outside, leaving the hall lamp lighted. The thought occurred to him that for a moment he would be silhouetted against the light and would make a perfect target. Still, the possibility of danger seemed remote until he heard the shot and saw the flash of flame from a far corner of the yard. A bullet slapped into the wall above his head.

He dived headlong across the porch and stumbled and fell into the yard as another shot slammed out from that far corner. This one missed by a good five feet. He yanked his gun from holster, fired three times, then rolled to a new position. He had nothing to shoot at except the spot where the ambusher had stood. The fellow wouldn't remain there, of course. A moment later he heard retreating footsteps as the man ran up the street.

For a time Neal did not move, aware that there might be another man waiting. He heard someone inside the house. Paul's voice called, "Neal! Are you all right, Neal?"

"Sure. Blow out the hall lamp."

The hall went black.

Neal went back into the house, closing the door. The lamp in the parlor was still lighted, and he saw Paul standing in the hall, the .45 he had taken from Ruggles in his hand.

He backed up as Neal approached, calling over his shoulder, "He's all right, Jane."

When Neal reached the parlor door, he saw that Jane, white faced and wearing only her nightgown, had come down. Laurie was crying.

Neal said, "I'm all right. Go tell Laurie it was just some crazy cowboys riding home."

Jane nodded and ran up the stairs. Neal looked at Paul and tried to grin. "Funny thing. Just as I went outside, I thought it would be a good time for somebody to take a pot shot at me. But I didn't really expect it to happen."

"Ruggles," maybe," Paul said.

Paul hesitated, a muscle in his cheek beating with the regularity of a pulse. He said, his voice trembling, "I'm scared, Neal. I haven't been before, but a thing like this—"

"I'm no hera, either," Neal said. "I never felt so hollow in my life as I feel right now. But I'm still going to see Joe. Lock the door behind me."

Outside, he stood motionless for several minutes, listening for sounds that were not natural at this hour, his eyes probing the night for any hint of movement. There was none, just the darkness, relieved slightly by the starshine. He couldn't stay here all night, he thought, and left the porch. Walking fast, he went down the path to the street and turned toward the east corner of the block. From there he started climbing the hill to Joe Rolfe's house.

The sheriff lived alone on the crest above the river. All of the houses in this part of town were dark, there were no street lamps, and more than once Neal came close to bumping into a clothes line or stumbling over a ledge of lava. He walked cautiously, taking a good ten minutes to reach Rolfe's house. It seemed to him, with his sense of time completely distorted, that another ten minutes passed before his pounding brought Rolfe's sleepy yell.

"I'm coming. Leave the damned door on its hinges, will you?"

A moment later Rolfe opened the door, a lamp in one hand.

"Hell, I might have known it'd be you," he grumbled. "If there's another man in the county who can get into trouble up to his neck like you, I don't know who it is. Come on in."

AS NEAL stepped through the door, Rolfe said, "The trouble is you woke me out of the best dream I've had in twenty years. There were pretty girls swarming all over the place, and me reaching for 'em and never quite getting hold of one of 'em." Suddenly he sensed from the grim expression on Neal's face that something serious had happened. "Let's have it, son. I'm getting so I rattle on like a buggy that hasn't been greased."

"Somebody took a couple of shots at me when I left the house a while ago," Neal said.

Rolfe sat down and stared at Neal. "I didn't think it would go that far. I sure didn't."

"That's not even a beginning."

Neal handed him the note Ruggles had given Paul, and told him what had happened first to Paul and Vicky, and then to him. Then Neal gave him the last note that had been shoved under the door. Rolfe read it, shook his head as if he didn't believe it, and began to curse.

"What kind of a damn fool proposition is this?" Rolfe shouted. "No sane man would lay a hand on a child." He stopped and gestured as if to thrust those words into oblivion. "I know what you're going to say—we aren't dealing with a sane man. I think you're right."

"That makes it worse." Neal said. "I'm beginning to think Ed Shelly isn't dead, as you've been claiming."

Rolfe pulled at his mustache thoughtfully. Then he asked, "How old a man was this Ruggles?"

"Thirty-five, maybe."

"If Ed Shelly were alive, he'd be just about your age, not more'n twenty-seven at the most. Shelton and Darley are older'n that. Besides, Ed was small. You'll remember you thought he was a half-grown kid. Well, he was about nineteen, and a boy isn't going to grow much after he's that old. Darley and Shelton are too tall, and you claim this Ruggles is also tall."

Neal nodded. "A regular splinter."

"There you are. It's none of those three, and the chances of another stranger's hanging around with nobody seeing him is mighty slim."

"You've heard of Ruggles?"

"Yep. I saw him in O'Hara's Bar. I reckon it was him, from the way you describe him, but I didn't know he was camped on your range. I figured he was just a drifter riding through."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do? Maybe you can tell me." Rolfe looked at the note that threatened Laurie. "Your girl's safe enough tonight, I reckon. Paul's in the house?" Neal nodded, and Rolfe went on, "It'll be different tomorrow, when she's out playing. If this bastard that calls himself Ed Shelly is half cracked, there's no way to tell what he'll do."

"Darley wants me out of town because of the man they have coming in on the stage from Portland," Neal said. "I have my doubts that anybody's half cracked. I think it's all hooked together."

"It could be that the shooting was done to scare you," Rolfe said. "A real good shot—and I figure Shelton is—could lay that first bullet in close, aiming to miss. Chances are he was just waiting for you, knowing that when you got the last note you'd come to me."

"Shelton," Neal said thoughtfully, the name jogging his memory. "I just remembered something eles. Vicky told me Ruggles had been in the office to see Shelton—not Darley. I asked her if he talked to Shelton because her father was out of the office, but she said no, his business was with Shelton."

"We've been overlooking Shelton from the first," Rolfe said. "Let's go wake him up and listen to him squirm. Wait'll I get my shirt and boots on."

When they reached the foot of the stairs that led to Darley's and Shelton's office over the Mercantile, Neal said, "Let me do the talking, Joe."

"Why?" Rolfe demanded.

"If he hears my voice and thinks I'm alone," Neal answered, "he'll tip his hand. But he'll play it close to his chest if he knows you're here."

Rolfe considered this for a moment, then said, "All right, Neal, we'll play it your way."

Neal climbed the stairs, making no effort to be silent. Rolfe followed two steps behind him. Standing beside the door, Neal pounded on it. There was one short moment of silence, then gunfire broke out from inside the company office. Bullets sliced through the door and slapped into the wall across the hall. There was no warning, no demand for the visitor to identify himself; nothing but the sudden burst of gunfire.

If Neal had been standing directly in front of the door, he'd have been hit. He drew his gun and fired, checking himself after the third shot as he realized he wasn't accomplishing anything. Shelton would not be foolish enough to remain in an exposed position on the other side of the door.

THEN, after the last echo of the shots had faded, Neal was aware that Rolfe was not standing on the stairs behind him. He backed up, calling, "Joe?"

"Here," Rolfe said. "I got tagged."

The sheriff was halfway down the stairs when Neal reached him. Neal asked, "Where'd you get it?"

"In the arm. It just took off a hunk of hide."

"We'll get Doc up."

"We'll do no such thing."

"Come on, come on," Neal said impatiently.

He was thoroughly angry, now that he'd had time to think about it. Not a word had been spoken. Whoever was in the office, and it must be Shelton, had cut loose the instant he'd heard Neal's knock.

By the time Neal and Rolfe reached the street, lights had bloomed in the hotel lobby, Doc Santee's office, and O'Hara's Bar. Before they reached the doctor's office, doors were flung open and men ran into the street, some in their underclothes, others hastily pulling on their pants, fingers fumbling with buttons.

Someone yelled, "What happened?"

Another man called, "Who got shot?"

The last was O'Hara's voice. Neal called, "Shelton tried to shoot me and the sheriff." They were in front of Santee's office then, the doctor standing in the doorway, his bulky body almost filling it, the lamp behind him throwing a long shadow across the board walk. Neal said, "Joe's hit, Doc."

"Fetch him in," Santee said, and swung around, content to ask questions later.

But the others had to know. O'Hara crowded into the office, Harvey Quinn shoving him forward. Olly Earl was a step behind them. O'Hara asked, "What happened, Clark?"

Santee had taken Rolfe into his back room. Neal did not follow, but stood looking at the men who formed a solid wedge in the doorway. Others had joined them, six altogether

—now seven—no, eight, as the Sorrenson kid who worked in the livery stable appeared in the rear of the crowd.

"Damn it, you going to answer me or not?" O'Hara shouted. "I asked you what happened."

"I went to Darley's and Shelton's office with Joe Rolfe," Neal said. "We wanted to ask him some questions, so I knocked on the door. Whoever was inside didn't say a word, just started shooting. It must have been Shelton. Joe got nicked."

Still they stood there, staring at him truculently as if not believing he was telling it straight. Finally Quinn asked, "Why would he do that?"

"Ask him."

"We will," O'Hara said, and, wheeling, motioned the others out of the doorway.

They were gone, O'Hara leading, the sound of their passage reminding Neal of the sullen departure of a storm.

Turning, he walked across Santee's outer office to the back room. Santee was putting a bandage on Rolfe's arm. He glanced up when Neal came in. He was a big bald man with huge hands that were miraculously nimble for their size. Like most doctors who served a vast area with a thin population, he was always tired and sleepy, for he spent more hours in the saddle than he did in bed.

"Joe'll have a sore arm for a while," Santee said. "He's staying here for the night. I'll give him something to make him sleep."

"The hell you will," Rolfe said angrily. "I'm going up there and drag Shelton out by his ear."

"You'll have a riot on your hands if you do," Neal said. "The bunch that was here went to see him. You know what he'll tell them."

"No I don't. There was nothing he can say. He started throwing lead before—"

"You'll wait till morning. They'll be cooled off by then." Santee picked up a bottle from a shelf, poured a drink, and handed it to Rolfe. "I'll tell you what he'll say, if you don't know. He didn't hear your voice before you knocked on the door. Is that right, Joe?"

"Yeah, but—"

"That's it in a nutshell. Shelton will claim he fired because he didn't know who was in the hall, but he had to protect the company money that was in the safe. He figured nobody would be pounding on the door at this time of night unless it was a holdup."

"That's the size of it," Neal said. "Doc, did Joe tell you about Ruggles, and the notes I've been getting?"

"He told me," Santee said, "and I don't have any idea what it means, either, if that's what you want to know. But it doesn't seem reasonable for a man like Ruggles to be hanging around for the fun of it. And I don't think the notes are just a bluff."

"I'm scared," Neal said. "I'm so damned scared I don't know up from down. If Laurie's really in danger—"

"Go home, Neal." Santee laid a hand on his shoulder. "Stay with Laurie. Keep her in the house."

"All right." Neal started to turn, then stopped. "Doc, would anybody but a crazy man think of using a child to get revenge?"

"You're thinking Ed Shelly is really around here?"

"It's possible."

"I don't think so," Santee said thoughtfully. "I'm convinced that Darley and Shelton are going to play every dirty, stinking trick they can to get you out of the country."

"But we don't know how far they'll go," Neal said, "so my question hasn't been answered. Would anyone but a crazy man hurt a child? Whether he's getting revenge or filling his pockets doesn't make any difference."

"No, it sure doesn't." Santee reached for his pipe and filled it, scowling as he tamped the tobacco into the bowl. "Neal, I'm a doctor. I'm no good at jobs like this." He nodded at Rolfe. "Or helping babies into the world." He tapped his forehead. "But up here, well, I just can't say. All I know is that there are times when a crazy man acts sane, and vice versa."

"But if a man lives with his hate long enough," Neal pressed, "or his greed—"

"He can go crazy," Santee interrupted. "I'll agree to that, but our trouble is we're shooting in the dark. We don't know our man. All you can do is to be damned sure Laurie is never alone."

"If you leave the house in the morning," Rolfe said, "be sure Paul's with Laurie."

"I aim to," Neal said, and turning, trudged wearily out of the office and along the board walk toward his home.

NEAL walked through the pines, thinking that what had been great trouble suddenly became little when compared to greater trouble. He stopped, a chill working down his spine. Ahead of him, between two pine trees, was something that did not belong there. To all appearances it was a post placed in the yard where there was no post. The darkness was so complete that he could not determine who or what it was.

He stood motionless, fighting the pressure against his chest. It must be a man, perhaps the one who had shot at him an hour or more ago. It was not Shelton, for he had been in his office talking to Quinn and O'Hara and the rest. It was Darley, maybe, or the stranger, Ruggles.

Neal's finger tightened on the trigger. Then his finger relaxed and he was limp, sick with a mental picture of what he had almost done. It wasn't a man. He'd heard a sob, a very feminine sound.

He slipped the gun back into the holster and called, "Is that you, Vicky?"

He caught a blur of movement as she whirled to face him; he heard a gasp that might have indicated surprise or fear, or both. Then he reached her and took her hands.

He asked, "Were you trying to get in the house?"

"No."

She sounded as if her throat were so tight and dry that not more than one syllable could escape from it. He took her by the arm and led her toward the house. She went docilely enough, waiting beside him while he fumbled with the key. He unlocked the door and said, "Go on in, Vicky."

"I don't want to see Paul now."

He didn't understand it, but he sensed that she was under some terrible emotional pressure and that her behavior was anything but logical because of that pressure. He said, "All right, you don't have to see him."

. . . [*Turn page*]

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Still holding her arm, he led her into the house and shut the door. He locked it, wondering if she were sleepwalking. No, he didn't think so. She was in a state of shock. Maybe she'd had a quarrel with Darley, or her mother.

He kept his grip on her arm as he led her into the parlor. She might give way to panic and run. If she were out of her head, she could do something tragic.

"I'll light a lamp," he said.

He struck a match and, lifting the chimney from the lamp, touched the flame to the wick. She said, and her voice sounded quite calm now, "I have to talk to you before I see Paul."

He said, "Of course, Vicky. Sit down."

She sat motionless, her hands tightly clasped on her lap, that strange, stricken look on her face.

He said, "I want to look in on Laurie; then I'll build a fire in the kitchen and make some coffee. You stay right there. I'll be back in a minute."

He climbed the stairs, hurrying because it occurred to him that what she wanted to talk about might have some bearing on his trouble. He wasn't sure she'd wait for him. She still might give way to panic and run.

The bracket lamp in the hall was lighted. Neal glanced into Laurie's room. She was all right. He closed her door and, stepping into Paul's room, said, "I'm back. You can go to sleep." Then he went downstairs.

"There's no way for a woman who has done wrong to tell about what she's done so it will sound as if she'd done right." Vicky folded her hands again and stared at them. "I can't face the risk of losing Paul, but I've got to tell him before we're married."

"You couldn't drive Paul off with a club," he said gently, "but why don't you try me first?"

She looked up, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Fay and Ben Darley are not my parents. My father died when I was a baby, and my mother supported me until she died. I was fifteen then. That was six years ago. I've made my own living since. I've had to iron and scrub floors and wash clothes for people and in places I'd rather not talk about."

Suddenly she was defiant. "I know what people will say about me, and about Paul for marrying me, when it gets out. I tried to keep from loving him. I kept putting him off, but I can't put him off any more, Neal. Everything I've ever wanted is right here with him."

She choked up and couldn't go on. "Listen, Vicky," Neal said, "you're worked up over nothing. I don't know why you're here with the Darleys, but it doesn't make any difference to Paul, or me and Jane. As far as other folks are concerned, they'll probably never know anything about it. It wouldn't make any difference, anyhow."

He saw that hope was stirring in her again. She said, "You'll never know how good it made me feel, being here tonight and seeing you and Jane and Laurie together. I guess I went kind of crazy after I left. It just seemed I was going to lose the first really fine things I've ever known, and the first good man who ever said he loved me."

"You won't lose him," he said. "Talk to Paul in the morning, but right now you go lie down on the couch. I'll find you a quilt."

"Wait," she said. "I've got to tell you about Darley. He hired me to come here and pretend I was his daughter. He hired Fay to live with him as his wife. He said he needed the dignity a family would give him, women to go to Sunday School and teach a class, and go to teas at Mrs. Olly Earl's house, and things like that."

Neal leaned forward in his chair. He said, "Go on."

"When I took the job, I hadn't met Shelton. I didn't know they were trying to swindle anyone, and I didn't catch on for quite a while after we came here. Fay knew, and I finally figured it out from little things she said. After we got here, Fay fixed it so I met Paul. It was Shelton's idea. He said it would be easier to handle you if Paul were in love with me. When I tell Paul this, he'll think—"

"No," Neal interrupted. "Paul is the kind who loves with all his heart, not just a part of it." He reached out and took her hands again. "Will you tell in court what you've just told me?"

"If it would help, but I don't really know anything. I seldom talk to Shelton, and Dar-

ley never has taken me into his confidence the way he has Fay." She looked down at her clasped hands again, hesitating, then said, "Darley said Shelton would kill me if I told you or Paul. He's mean. Darley says he'd kill a woman as soon as he would a man."

"We'll see you're protected. Have you heard any talk about killing or kidnapping Laurie?"

"No." She looked at him, horrified by his question. "Why would he?"

"I don't know, except to get at me. Maybe they just want to scare me so I'll leave town."

She nodded. "Darley's afraid of you. You whipped him, and now he's scared."

"The money is the only thing they want?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What about this Ruggles?"

"I told you all I know about him. He came to the office to see Shelton and they had a talk in Darley's private office. I don't know what they said."

He rose, convinced that she had told him all she could and what she'd said was the truth. But it wasn't enough to help. He said, "In the morning you tell Paul what you just told me. Everything will be all right."

Taking the lamp, he led the way back to the parlor. He brought a quilt and pillow from the hall closet. When he left her, her head on the pillow, the quilt tucked up under her chin, she seemed completely relaxed.

He blew out the lamp and climbed the stairs, the gray light of first dawn showing in the east. Now he had Vicky to protect as well as Laurie. He couldn't leave her alone down

[*Turn page*]

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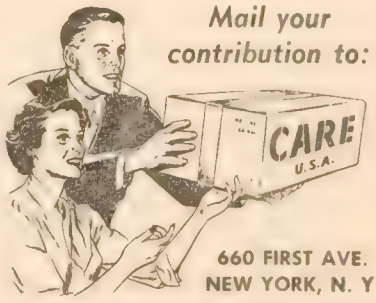

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there. If Darley and Shelton found out she had left the boarding house and had come here, they might try to kill her to keep her from talking.

He turned and went back down the stairs. Drawing a chair in front of the fireplace, he sat down to wait, his gun across his lap.

WHEN Jane went down the stairs the next morning, she found Neal still dozing in the rocking chair in the parlor, his pistol on his lap. Vicky was asleep on the couch, a quilt tucked under her chin.

For a moment Jane stood motionless, puzzled by this, and vaguely alarmed. Vicky should be in Grandma Poole's boarding house, and Neal should have been upstairs in bed. She tiptoed across the room and shook Neal awake. He grunted and rubbed his eyes, then rose.

Slipping the gun into its holster, he pointed to Vicky and whispered, "Let her sleep."

He crossed the dining room and went into the kitchen. Jane followed him, and he closed the door behind her. He grinned ruefully. "I sure turned out to be a good guard, going to sleep like that. I'd get shot, if I were in the Army."

She gripped his arms. "Neal, what happened? You've been up all night, sitting there with that gun on your lap."

"Wait'll I build a fire," he said. "I need some coffee."

She waited beside the stove until he had the fire going, the pine snapping with staccato cracks. Then she set the coffee pot on the stove and dropped into the chair Neal had brought over for her. He pulled up another chair and sat down, his angular face set hard.

He told her about Vicky, then said, "Even after hearing Vicky tell about Darley, I don't see what we can do. We just know what we suspected all the time."

"What happened after you left the house last night, before you found Vicky?"

He hesitated, then told her about getting Joe Rolfe out of bed, going to Shelton's office, and being shot at. "We still don't know whether those notes are bluffs, or whether Ed Shelly is alive and hiding around here."

"It's a trick," Jane said. "It's got to be. Neal, did you think Darley and Shelton might be sending you those notes to keep you in the house?"

He turned sharply to face her. "And while I'm staying here watching out for Laurie, they get out of town with the money. No, I hadn't thought of it." He frowned, and added thoughtfully, "And this is the day they have a man coming from Portland, a fat goose they aim to pick. It would work just as well for them if I stayed in the house as if I got out of town."

He would be safer here, she thought, but he would never forgive himself if he stayed at home, falling into the trap they were setting. No, he couldn't stay, being the kind he was.

She said, "I'll wake Paul. You go on to the bank. We'll take care of Laurie, I promise."

He looked at her doubtfully. "I don't know. This is Joe Rolfe's business."

"You've made it yours, darling. You can't hand it to Joe now." She rose and, going to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "Ed Shelly's been on your mind all these years hasn't he?"

"How did you know?"

"You've talked in your sleep," she said. "You were dreaming about it, I guess."

"I dreamed about it, all right," he said. "It was always the same dream. Ed Shelly had come back to Cascade City and he was standing in front of me with a gun in his hand. I didn't have a gun and I'd yell at him that I wasn't heeled and I'd try to run, but I couldn't move. Then you'd shake me until I woke up."

He whirled away from her and, going to the stove, poured himself a cup of coffee. "If Ed Shelly wanted to get square with me by worrying the hell out of me," he said, "he's doing it. Maybe I've worried so much about it I brought it to pass." He tried to grin at her over the top of the coffee cup. "Fool notion, isn't it? I think I knew all the time I'd have to face something like this, but it's worse because of Laurie."

"Neal, maybe we're excited over nothing. They won't hurt Laurie if it is just a bluff. And even if Ed Shelly is hiding around town or out in the timber, he wouldn't take it out on Laurie. No man would."

"You're wrong," he said. "I've seen too

many men do cruel, unreasonable things."

"We'll be careful, Neal," she said. "That's all we can do. I'll get breakfast."

"No, this coffee's all I want. You wake Paul up and tell him about Vicky." He turned toward the dining-room door, then paused as he said, "I have to see Laurie before I go."

Jane nodded, understanding, and followed him up the stairs to Laurie's room. She was awake. When she saw Neal she jumped out of bed and ran to him, squealing, "I had the nicest dream, Daddy. I thought Vicky was going to be here all day with me."

"Laurie, your dream is going to come true," Neal said. "Vicky will be here all day. She's asleep in the parlor. Don't make any noise until she wakes up."

Laurie jumped off the bed and tiptoed around the room. "See? I won't make a sound. I'll walk like that till she wakes up," she whispered.

Neal picked her up and kissed her, then whirled away and walked out of the room. Jane said to Laurie, "Let's get your shoes and stockings on. I haven't gotten breakfast yet. I expect Paul and Vicky will be hungry when they wake up."

"I want to wake Paul up and tell him about Vicky," Laurie said. "Can I?"

"Yes, I guess so."

Jane left the room, keeping her back to Laurie so the child would not see the tears in her eyes again. There was so much that was good in their lives, she thought, Neal's and hers and Laurie's—Vicky's and Paul's too. Why did it all have to be threatened now?

(To be continued in the next issue)

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF SCORPIO

OCT. 23—NOV. 22

THE Statue of Liberty on Bedloe's Island, New York, was unveiled October 28, 1887 in the presence of more than 1,000,000 people. This symbol of hope and optimism for the millions of immigrants coming to the New World is also symbolic of Scorpio's enthusiasm for the future. No matter how black the past has been, Mr. Scorpio never loses hope. He knows tomorrow will be better, and with his faith and determination it always is better. Few men attract success as much as Scorpio does.

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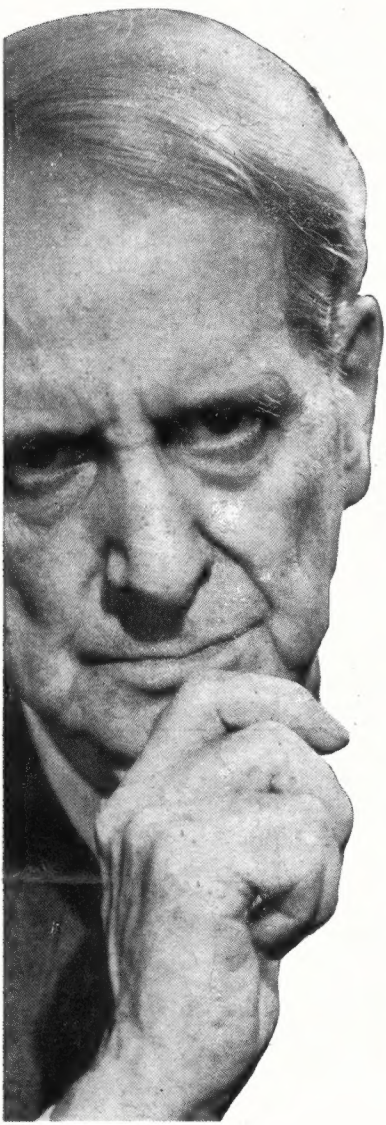

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